SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Mussolini, uomo di teatro

(*Mussolini, Man of the Theatre*)

Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia
Dottorato di ricerca in Tecnologia digitale e metodologia di ricerca sullo spettacolo

Candidato
Patricia Leigh Gaborik
Matricola 1365532

Relatore
Antonella Ottai

A/A 2012/2013

Table of Contents

Davvero mostra di non aver compreso l'arte dell'indagine chi ravvisi soltanto un gioco nel chiedere a un uomo di Stato quale musica preferisca, perché proprio questi piccoli indizi forniscono elementi decisive per valutare la sua azione politica

– German biographer Emil Ludwig (pseudonym of Emil Cohn), *Colloqui con Mussolini*.

List of Abbreviations for Cited Archive Collections

ACS – Archivio centrale dello stato, Roma
    MCP – Ministero della cultura popolare
        UCT – Ufficio Censura Teatrale
        b, f – busta, fascicolo
    MI – Ministero dell'Interno
        PolPol – Polizia politica
    SPD - Segretaria Particolare del Duce
        RSI – Repubblica Sociale Italiano
        CR – Carteggio riservato
        CO – Carteggio ordinario
GRI – Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA (home to the Massimo Bontempelli papers)
    b, f – box, folder
HI – Hoover Institute, Stanford University, Stanford, CA
    b – box
INDA – Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico, Siracusa
MBAG – Museo Biblioteca dell'Attore, Genova

Introduzione: Mussolini l'attore?

Benito Mussolini è l'icona più duratura del fascismo italiano. Quell'imponente presenza fisica, quella voce tonante, profonda e non sgradevole, quel carisma così difficile da definire hanno qualcosa di strano per noi, ma le testimonianze dell'epoca sono concordi. Ricordiamo la testa completamente calva, la linea prominente della mascella, gli occhi sporgenti, il pugno che si agita nello spazio o chiuso e appoggiato alla cinta di una impeccabile uniforme nera. Vedere i cinegiornali di allora produce un certo sconcerto negli spettatori di oggi, ma occorre riconoscere che Mussolini aveva senza dubbio doti performative: un elemento, questo, sul quale anche i suoi nemici erano d'accordo.

Di lui o delle sue orazioni è stato detto: "Egli, come pochi, conosce l'arte del dire"[1], "La sua parola squilla come una tromba di guerra e canta come un bronzo sacro"[2], "Il gesto del Duce è superbo e bellissimo"[3]. Il futurista Emilio Settimelli ha sintetizzato: "Un gigante questo magnifico Mussolini!" [4] (un gigante che era alto solo un metro e settanta).

Oggi, però, Mussolini non viene più ricordato come un ottimo oratore ma piuttosto come un grande attore: "Un commediante meraviglioso"[5], "Un recitatore innato"[6], "Come istrione, è veramente un genio"[7], "Lo spettacolo sarebbe stato nulla senza il suo primo attore"[8].

Nel 1922, quando Mussolini giunse al potere, il collegamento tra eloquenza oratoria e abilità di attore era molto più stretta di quanto non sia oggi. Una lunga tradizione vedeva

[1] Giuseppe Cavaciocchi, *Mussolini. sintesi critiche*, Cappelli Editore, Bologna 1933, p. 13.
[2] Fernando Gori, *Mussolini Poeta*, Edizioni Pattuglia Nera, Roma 1933, p. 7.
[3] Luigi Freddi, *Pattuglie*. Editrice Antieuropa, Roma s.d. (but 1930), p. 54.
[4] Emilio Settimelli, *Mussolini visto da Settimelli*, Casa Editrice Pinciana, Roma 1933, p. 19.
[5] Gaetano Salvemini, cit. in Berneri, *Mussolini, Psicologia di un dittatore*, ed. Pier Carlo Masini, Edizioni Azione Comune, Milano 1966, p. 25. Il testo di Berneri, è stato scritto negli anni trenta, ma non pubblicato, con il titolo *Mussolini, grande attore.*
[6] Ruggero Zangrandi, cit. in Introduzione a Berneri, *Mussolini, Psicologia di un dittatore*, cit., p. 24.
[7] Alceste De Ambris, "Mussolini. La leggenda e l'uomo," (1930) in *Benito Mussolini. Quattro Testimonianze*, ed. Renzo de Felice, La Nuova Italia Editrice, Firenze 1976, p. 79.
[8] Luigi Barzini, cit. in Introduzione a Berneri, *Mussolini, Psicologia di un dittatore*, cit., p. 24. Per Barzini, si veda *The Italians*, Antheneum, New York 1967 [1964].

l'arte del dire e l'arte del recitare strettamente connesse, come indica l'origine latina del verbo (*re-citare*), la quale allude tanto all'atto di ripetere a memoria quanto a quello di impersonare sulla scena una parte. Ai tempi di Mussolini, gli stessi manuali trattavano l'oratoria e la recitazione assieme, ed è solo attraverso una attenta lettura che il lettore di oggi può capire quando i loro autori pensavano a un pulpito e quando a un palcoscenico. La ragione di questa indistinzione è chiara: la padronanza dell'*actio* – la parte della retorica che si interessa della voce e dei gesti di colui che parla – è altrettanto essenziale per l'oratore e l'attore di teatro. Nessuno potrebbe mai diventare un grande oratore o un grande attore senza giungere a esercitare un controllo assoluto sul suo corpo e sulla voce, e senza imparare a manipolare entrambi per ottenere un effetto sicuro su un dato pubblico.

Tra il XVIII e il XX secolo, la recitazione teatrale e la sua teorizzazione registrò un costante allontanamento dai dettami della retorica classica e da uno stile piuttosto statico e roboante, in favore di un più stile più naturalistico[9]. In Italia, dove i grandi istrioni erano anche gli amministratori delle compagnie teatrali, gli anni a cavallo tra la fine del XIX e l'inizio del XX secolo segnarono un periodo di rapida transizione in questo senso, tanto che nel 1959 l'autore di un manuale di *dizione e di recitazione* avrebbe proclamato che la "declamazione" (vale a dire la tendenza a recitare con "gesto ed espressione piuttosto esagerati ed enfatici") aveva regnato fino alla fine del secolo precedente, ma che adesso si preferiva la "recitazione" (più semplice e più naturale, e da lui definita "ricco di colore, di passaggi, di sfumature"[10]). Nel 1914, il futuro principe dei critici teatrali italiani, Silvio d'Amico, notò infatti che in Italia i grandi attori, anche i più grandi, si affidavano al proprio talento vocale. In questo senso la figura del mattatore "non interpreta, ma *dice*; ha delle parole che sottolinea *sempre*; ne ha delle altre che pronuncia *sempre* sottovoce […] Egli

[9] Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion. Studies in the Science of Acting*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor 1993. Cfr. Claudio Vicentini, *La teoria della recitazione, dall'antichità al Settecento*, Marsilio, Venezia 2012.
[10] Walter Fagiolini, *Dizione e recitazione*, Tipografiia arti grafiche friulane, Udine 1959, p. 1-7. Sull'evoluzione dell'arte della recitazione nel periodo pertinente, si veda Claudio Meldolesi, *Fondamenti del teatro italiano. La generazione dei registi*, Bulzoni, Roma 1984.

insomma dà rilievo alla parola, tutt'al più alla battuta, qualche rara volta alla scene; *ma non al carattere*, e men che mai alla commedia" [11]. Questa non era del tutto una critica, perchè d'Amico ammirava un simile talento; e tuttavia, metteva bene in chiaro che questo tipo di attore non comprendeva il dramma né la psicologia dei personaggi che interpretava. Nel ventesimo secolo, proprio questa capacità sarebbe venuta a marcare la differenza tra un attore tecnicamente preparato e un grande attore.

Amici e nemici erano d'accordo su una cosa: Mussolini era stato un vero maestro della *actio*. Non è quindi così strano vedere che lo si è confrontato – in senso positivo e in senso peggiorativo – persino ai più grandi attori del periodo eroico del teatro dell'Italia unita: Ernesto Rossi e Tommaso Salvini[12]. Le analisi stilistiche dell'arte oratorica del duce, possibili grazie ai cinegiornali del giorno, rivelano l'efficacia, la coerenza e la precisione dei suoi gesti e della sua dizione, così come il coordinamento che viene a stabilirsi tra i due. I filmati inducono a sospettare che conoscesse le pubblicazioni sulll'arte della persuasione pubblica, per le tecniche che seguiva alla perfezione, dalla posizione con le gambe leggermente divaricate (per trasmettere una impressione di solidità) all'uso esclusivo della mano destra nella gestualità, e dalla preferenza per i gesti circolari ed "espansivi" (che si riteneva dessero la cadenza) alla esattezza con cui le ripetizioni dei movimenti accompagnavano le ripetizioni verbali[13]. In fin dei conti, quindi, non è affatto strano che il duce abbia finito per essere considerato da tutti un attore.

E tuttavia, poiché molte delle abilità di base richieste all'attore e all'oratore erano le stesse, tanti i maestri quanto i teorici stavano bene attenti a distinguere obiettivi e contesto.

[11] Silvio d'Amico, *Cronache 1914/1955*, a cura di Alessandro d'Amico e Lina Vito, Novecento, Palermo 2001, Volume I Tomo I. p. 94.
[12] Barzini, *The Italians*, cit., p. 145.
[13] Marco Gherbi, *Analisi della comunicazione non verbale nei discorsi di Mussolini*, Tesi di Laurea specialistica alla Università degli studi di Trieste, 2006. Fanno impressione le osservazioni di Gherbi assieme ad un'analisi del duce nei cinegiornali quando messi a confronto con un manuale come quello scritto da Giovanni Ghirlanda, attore della Compagnia Reale di Torino, nonché instruttore di recitazione, *Cenni sopra l'arte drammatica* (Tipografia Mariani, Firenze 1896).

L'attore non impersona se stesso, le parole che pronuncia non sono sue ma del drammaturgo, le emozioni appartengono al personaggio di volta in volta interpretato, la situazione sul palco non è reale ma una finzione. L'oratore, al contrario, è sempre se stesso, pronuncia le proprie stesse parole e comunica i propri stessi sentimenti, e la situazione non è finta ma reale[14]. Così, bisognerebbe riconoscere che, nonostante le sue innegabili doti oratorie, Benito Mussolini non fu affatto attore: quando annunciava dal balcone di Piazza Venezia la creazione dell'impero o pronunciava il suo ultimo discorso pubblico sul palco del Teatro Lirico di Milano nel dicembre del 1944, non c'era alcuna finzione: quello che stava facendo apparteneva sin troppo al mondo reale.

L'immagine di Mussolini come attore rimane onnipresente ancora oggi. Da un certo punto di vista si tratta di una metafora innocua: ben prima che Shakespeare definisse l'intero mondo un teatro (una dichiarazione che da più di cinquant'anni ormai incoraggia lo studio dei modi in cui ci mettiamo in scena nella vita di tutti i giorni), esisteva una tendenza a parlare dei politici e in generale degli uomini pubblici come di attori sul grande palcoscenico della vita. In un saggio del 2001 su politica e recitazione, il famoso commediografo americano Arthur Miller notava che "il mistero del leader in quanto performer è antico quanto la civiltà", all'interno di una riflessione più vasta sulle "manifestazioni del potere che le persone richiedono ai leader di impersonare e recitare" [15]. Inoltre, considerato che il dittatore italiano possedeva una abilità oratoria impressionante e che il regime pianificava in maniera estremamente attenta l'effetto carismatico del suo Capo adoperando tutti i mezzi tradizionali e moderni per farlo giungere a fasce della popolazione quanto più ampie possibile, difficilmente possono sorprendere commenti come quelli dello storico australiano Richard Bosworth, il quale si riferisce ai cinegiornali come a "drammi in costume" e parla delle masse che si recavano ai raduni di Mussolini come delle "indispensabili comparse" del

[14] S. Berti, *La declamazione e la drammatica secondo la scuola della natura*, Tipografica di Carlo Rebagli, Firenze 1849, p. 19.
[15] Arthur Miller, *On Politics and the Art of Acting*, Viking, New York 2001, pp. 2, 79.

ventennio[16].

Tuttavia, l'uso disinvolto di metafore teatrali entrate nella lingua comune – metafore come impersonare un "ruolo", "teatro di guerra", "scena politica" – è una cosa; il riferirsi costantemente a Mussolini come attore è invece un'altra. Per sapere perché, dobbiamo prima ricostruire i modi in cui tale immagine è emersa e quali sono ancora oggi i suoi effetti tanto nel discorso pubblico quanto nella riflessione degli studiosi sul fascismo. L'immagine di Mussolini come attore si affermò presto, e non venne né dagli storici impegnati a ricostruire il passato, né dalle masse dei sostenitori del duce, anche se ci sono state delle eccezioni. Per esempio Luigi Pirandello e un altro giovane drammaturgo, Orio Vergani, entrambi simpatizzanti del regime, parlarono di un duce che era "in un certo senso, l'attore del proprio personaggio"; mentre alcuni fascisti devoti lo vedevano come una sorta di super-attore: "Quando autore e attore si sommano nella stessa persona, quando la parte è così necessaria e alta, il rappresentarla non ê più un'arte, ma un rito" [17]).

Più spesso, però, l'immagine del dittatore come attore era promossa dai suoi nemici: era un modo rapido per screditarlo. Per alcuni si trattava "semplicemente" di un attore, non di un vero uomo politico in grado di avere delle vere idee politiche: un sentimento che traspare dall'osservazione di un biografo, alcuni decenni dopo la caduta del regime, secondo il quale a volte Mussolini si rivelava essere "un contadino stordito che recitava la parte del Presidente del Consiglio" [18]. Mino Maccari, che era stato un fascista intransigente, ma che cambiò retrospettivamente il proprio giudizio, fece questa distinzione anni dopo in un'intervista sul duce come "teatrante" con una voce piacevole e suadente: "aveva quel genere di fascino di

[16] R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy. Life Under the Dictatorship, 1915-1945*, Penguin, New York 2006, pp. 9, 11.
[17] Orio Vergani, *Ciano. Una lunga confessione*, Longanesi, Milano 1974, p. 40; Carlo Delcroix, *Un uomo e un popolo*, Vallecchi, Firenze 1928, p. 4.
[18] Richard Collier, *Duce! A Biography of Mussolini*, Viking, New York 1971, p. 70.

basso livello, […] Però non aveva assolutamente senso critico"[19]. (La logica è qui lo stesso di quello di d'Amico: ci sono poeti che creano e capiscono quello che creano; e ci sono attori che recitano magistralmente, ma non arrivano a comprendere.)

Ma se una citazione del genere insinua il sospetto che Mussolini (il quale aveva in effetti origini molto umili), non aveva i numeri per guidare un paese, per molti altri l'epitaffio di attore è diventato un sinonimo di maestro di illusioni. Per loro, le imprese compiute da Mussolini davanti alla macchina fotografica – la trebbiatura del grano, le corse a rotta di collo su un cavallo o a guida di un aereo, i discorsi ai balconi di tutta Italia – facevano parte di una strategia per ingannare gli italiani: qualsiasi cosa facesse non sarebbe stato che uno spettacolo per mascherare o la verità di ciò che le camicie nere combinavano o il fatto che in realtà non lo sapessero nemmeno loro. Nel 1934 uno dei suoi nemici, Camillo Berneri, scrisse dall'esilio un saggio intitolato *Mussolini, grande attore,* che sosteneva che la grandezza del duce come politico si basasse interamente sulla sua abilità di attore. La grandezza di un uomo politico, precisò, non era in questo caso un complimento[20]. Alceste De Ambris – un anarco-sindacalista, all'inizio alleato di Mussolini, quindi strenuo oppositore finito anch'egli in esilio – ha sostenuto che il successo del duce dipendeva dalla sua mancanza di scrupoli, dall'impudenza, dall'egoismo e dal virtuosismo istrionico combinati assieme. Quest'ultimo era fondamentale, affermò De Ambris: "Io nego a Mussolini ogni altra genialità; ma non esito a ripetere che, come istrione, è veramente un genio". E continuò:

> Egli vive – o piuttosto, ha sempre vissuto – recitando una "parte" come un attore sul palcoscenico: di socialista rivoluzionario intransigente; di neutralista feroce; di interventista furibondo; di rinnovatore audace; di reazionario ad oltranza. Ed è onesto riconoscere che ognuno di queste "parti" è stata da lui recitata sempre alla perfezione. La migliore scusa per coloro che anche oggi si fanno ingannare dalla sua abilità di commediante, è che in precedenza è riuscito ad ingannare tutti quelli che ha voluto ingannare, senza eccezione. Uomini di notevole intelligenza, di acuto giudizio, di consumato esperienza. Ci sono cascati, non meno delle folle ignare su cui ha fatto le prime prove.

[19] Intervista a Mino Maccari, in Massimo Cardillo, *Il duce in moviola. Politica e divismo nei cinegiornali e documentari ‹‹Luce››*, Edizioni Dedalo, Bari 1983, p. 130.
[20] Berneri, nel saggio pubblicato anni dopo con il titolo *Mussolini, Psicologia*, cit., p. 29.

> Io credo che Mussolini riesca ad ingannare perfino se stesso, perché anche di fronte a se stesso non cessa di recitare la sua "parte." Sarebbe troppo poco dire che l'istrionismo è in lui una "seconda natura." No, è la sua natura, senza più e senza meno.[21]

Opinioni come quella di De Ambris erano spesso manifestate in termini simili ma meno articolarti (e più sarcastici). Non era difficile leggere battute come quella del drammaturgo Sem Benelli "non tutti i pagliacci sono attori"[22] o rappresentazioni del fascismo come quelle che troviamo sul giornale satirico "Il Becco Giallo":

Cominciò così uno slittamento semantico in base al quale la parola "attore" non significava più "grande oratore" o anche "soltanto un oratore", ma invece, molto semplicemente, stava per "bugiardo". Se Mussolini prendeva una posizione – rivoluzionaria o reazionaria che fosse – non faceva che interpretare un ruolo, e interpretare un ruolo voleva dire ora nascondere la verità. Quanto meglio mentiva, tanto migliore attore lo si considerava. In questa logica, è stato messo al servizio della denigrazione del regime fascista un vecchio pregiudizio anti-teatrale risalente almeno a Platone, secondo il quale il teatro, in quanto mera imitazione, per la sua capacità di ingannare gli uomini rappresenta una minaccia[23].

Dopo la guerra, parlare di Mussolini come attore – e del fascismo come una pantomima – "era una tentazione tanto diffusa quanto ideologicamente ambigua", ha notato

[21] De Ambris, *Mussolini. La leggenda*, cit., p. 79.
[22] La battuta di Benelli viene dalla sua commedia *La festa*; non ha sfuggito l'occhio del censore. Le vignette si trovano all'ACS, SPD CR, b.51.
[23] La teorizzazione di Platone viene dal libro decimo della *Repubblica.* Si veda anche Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*, University of California Press, Los Angeles 1981.

lo storico Sergio Luzzatto[24]. Gli italiani preferirono rifugiarsi nelle caratterizzazioni che di loro avevano dato grandi artisti stranieri del calibro di un Edward M. Forster, che nel suo romanzo del 1905 *Monteriano* aveva sentenziato che "gli italiani sono essenzialmente drammatici: guardano l'amore e la morte come spettacoli" [25]. Il poeta e romanziere futurista Aldo Palazzeschi aveva sempre considerato il duce "carne della Nostra carne", mentre un altro scrittore, Paolo Monelli, pensò che questo fosse particolarmente vero proprio in relazione alla sua teatralità: era un tratto distintivo di tutti gli italiani, e così Mussolini era semplicemente un "tipico rappresentante di una grande parte di noi." Tuttavia la discussione sull'argomento infuriava, perché alcuni temevano che tali spiegazioni servissero a discolpare non solo Mussolini ma tutti gli italiani. Come mostra Luzzatto, se tutti erano colpevoli, tutti erano innocenti: "davvero c'era differenza tra una condanna collettiva e un'assoluzione generale degli italiani?" [26]. Il fascino di una tale spiegazione è chiaro: molto meglio accettare uno stereotipo diffuso (persino Orson Welles disse una volta che "Tutti gli italiani sono attori"[27]) che accettare la responsabilità di venti anni di fascismo e tutto quello che aveva significato per un'Europa dilaniata dalla guerra e per i suoi milioni di morti.

I contemporanei facevano bene a chiedersi se tali spiegazioni fossero davvero sufficienti. E faremmo bene a continuare a chiedercelo anche oggi, perché tali risposte di comodo mantengono la loro forza. In una delle più belle testimonianze della persistenza del pregiudizio anti-teatrale, caratterizzare Mussolini come attore sorregge una serie di argomenti sulla sua presunta disonestà, narcisismo, instabilità psicologica. Questo è particolarmente vero, anche se non esclusivamente, per la tradizione critica inglese. Una delle prime voci di questa tendenza è quella di un giornalista italiano trapiantato negli Stati Uniti, Luigi Barzini Jr., che ha introdotto presso gli americani l'Italia moderna grazie a un famoso libro del 1964,

[24] Sergio Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce*, Einaudi, Torino 1998, p. 131. Si veda anche Luzzatto, *L'immagine del duce. Mussolini nella fotografia dell'Istituto Luce*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 2001.
[25] E.M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Penguin, New York 2001 [1905], p. 81.
[26] Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce*, cit., pp. 130-131 (anche per le citazioni).
[27] Barzini, *The Italians*, cit., p. 62

The Italians. Più sorprendente è il modo in cui la valutazione di Barzini, che sostanzialmente replica la logica di De Ambris, giunge quasi a negare che Benito Mussolini abbia avuto una qualche rilevanza politica:

> Ha perso la guerra, il potere, il suo paese, la sua amante, il suo posto nella storia, e la sua vita, ma riuscì a quello che aveva voluto fare da quando aveva preso il potere. Non rendere il suo paese sicuro e prospero. Non preparare l'Italia per una guerra moderna e per la vittoria. Il suo vero disegno … era soltanto quello di mettere in scena il più vasto e durevole spettacolo mai visto, di cui egli era il sceneggiatore, il regista e il protagonista eroico. In questo suo compito riuscì mirabilmente. Per cui non è esatto confrontarlo a Cesare, Cromwell, Cavour, Bismarck o Talleyrand, ma a personaggi come P.T. Barnum e Cecil B. De Mille, che entrambi tentarono di creare "the greatest show on earth", e ad attori eroici come Ernesto Rossi o Tommaso Salvini. Era un interprete fiammeggiante di ruoli eroici nello stile dei grandi tragici ottocenteschi o dei baritoni operistici. [28]

La grande ironia della posizione di Barzini è che il dittatore italiano avrebbe voluto una sola cosa, e così tanto da sacrificare molte vite (compresa la propria) in suo nome. Mussolini voleva rifare gli italiani: voleva trasformare i suoi compatrioti in seri e disciplinati soldati – farne un popolo che nessuno avrebbe più potuto definire di "attori". Su questo Mussolini era esplicito tanto in pubblico quanto in privato, e nelle sue apparizioni pubbliche cercò anche di offrire un modello di comportamento, e di mostrare al modo esterno un nuovo tipo di italiano, come vediamo dalla testimonianza della sua amante Claretta Petacci, a cui disse, "Hai visto come parlavo, immobile e senza un gesto, fermo? Voglio sfatare questa storia che il popolo italiano quando parla gesticola, mentre non è vero. Gli stranieri hanno la convinzione che l'italiano è come una marionetta" [29].

È per questi propositi di rinnovamento che Mussolini fu a capo di un regime che riformò l'educazione, immaginò una terza via tra il capitalismo e il comunismo, costruì un impero, e fondò un gran numero di istituzioni culturali (alcune delle quali saranno l'oggetto

[28] *Ivi*, p. 145.
[29] Claretta Petacci, *Mussolini segreto. Diari 1932-1938*, a cura di Mauro Suttora, Rizzoli, Milano 2009, p. 190. Mussolini cambiò lo stile negli anni anche grazie alla sua conoscenza del fatto che la percezione di lui attraverso la telecamera sarebbe stato diverso rispetto alla percezione fatta dal vivo. Si veda Gabriele Pedullà, *Parole al potere. Discorsi politici italiani*, BUR Rizzoli, Milano 2011.

del presente studio). Il problema del fascismo non è stato quello di essere uno spettacolo: il problema è che il suo progetto politico si è rivelato sin troppo reale. Come alcuni dei suoi contemporanei, il ministro fascista Giuseppe Bottai finì per concludere che Mussolini era diventato un attore che interpretava il ruolo che il pubblico gli richiedeva; quando il culto del duce aveva ormai raggiunto proporzioni schiaccianti, Bottai confessò nel suo diario privato le proprie paure di una sorta involuzione teatrale del regime: poiché Mussolini era diventato una figura tanto amata, la gente rischiava di scambiare il fascismo con una messa in scena[30]. A leggere *The Italians*, evidentemente le sue paure non erano così infondate.

Questo tipo di valutazioni su Mussolini è strettamente collegato ad altre sul fascismo nel suo complesso. Il crollo del regime in due soli anni dopo venti di governo è stato letto come il risultato di un sistema interamente costruito sulla recitazione. Questo perché per Barzini (e per molti altri, come abbiamo già visto), Mussolini non ha ingannato solo gli italiani, ma anche se stesso:

> Ha impersonato un ruolo versatile e poliedrico, quello di Mussolini, una miscela eroica di condottiero rinascimentale, freddo pensatore machiavellico, leader di una minoranza rivoluzionaria alla Lenin, dittatore dalla tempra di acciaio, despota umanitario, Casanova e superuomo nietzscheano. Più avanti ha aggiunto al suo repertorio tratti napoleonici, con risultati ben noti, e, poco prima di morire, il rinnovatore socialista della società. Lui non era nessuna di queste cose. Alla fine, come un vecchio attore, non si ricordava più ciò che era, provava, credeva e desiderava. [31]

Facendo eco alla visione di un Mussolini "carne della nostra carne", Barzini ha scritto:

> Anche lui era un italiano. Anche lui amava un bello spettacolo, apprezzava una buona parata militare, era confortato da una sfilata di navi, o rincuorato da una adunanza oceanica in una piazza della città. Anche lui credeva ai i suoi slogan. Anche lui era stupito dalle statistiche false, emozionato da vuote vanterie, portato alla lacrime dalla propria stessa oratoria. Anche lui, confuse le apparenze con la realtà, l'impiallacciatura con il legno massello. La verità, anche per lui, erano le apparenze e quello che piaceva credere alla gente. [32]

[30] Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, ed. Giordano Bruno Guerri, BUR Rizzoli, Milano 2001 [1982], p. 218.
[31] Barzini, *The Italians*, cit., p. 145.
[32] *Ivi*, p. 149.

Ecco dunque svelati Mussolini e il fascismo: erano caduti prigionieri della menzogna del teatro. Per come la storia ci viene spesso raccontata, i guai erano iniziati con il "patto d'acciaio" - la decisione del duce di allearsi con Hitler e di seguirlo in una campagna razziale nella quale gli italiani non credevano e in una guerra per la quale non erano preparati. Mussolini non ha visto la verità, perché non era più in grado di farlo, ed i suoi collaboratori non avevano il coraggio o la volontà di distruggere le sue illusioni. Quando ha commesso il terribile errore di entrare in guerra contro la Francia e l'Inghilterra, lo ha fatto perché "non aveva mai nemmeno sospettato che dietro il suo show non ci fosse quasi nulla. Non ha mai saputo veramente quanto debole, disarmato e demoralizzato fosse il paese. [...] Mussolini divenne completamente dedito al paradiso artificiale che aveva creato per gli altri"[33]. È facile confutare affermazioni del genere alla luce delle informazioni di cui disponiamo oggi. Mussolini riceveva relazioni periodiche sullo stato d'animo della popolazione, e almeno dal 1938 dovette lottare con la delusione di non essere riuscito a fascistizzare i propri connazionali come aveva sperato. All'approssimarsi della fine, sapeva ormai di aver fallito[34]. Mentre alcuni incolpano gli stessi italiani di aver mosso i fili della marionetta Mussolini, Barzini insistette sulla responsabilità del dittatore, ingannato dal proprio spettacolo esattamente come tutti gli altri. Nella ripetizione di questa messa in scena, il destino dell'Italia era scritto, l'Italia era in una tragedia, e gli italiani - disillusi o ingannati a secondo dei casi - e il loro leader erano prigionieri delle loro parti sino alla tragica, inevitabile fine. Ma la storia può davvero liquidare il fascismo in questo modo?

Le fantasie di *The Italians* si riaffaccianao sorprendentemente anche nelle opere a carattere più scientifico. Lo storico inglese Denis Mack Smith ha scritto una biografia di Mussolini, del 1982, ed è considerato tra i più autorevoli specialisti del tema, molto letto,

[33] *Ivi*, p. 150-51.
[34] Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra*, Laterza, Roma 2007, Capitolo 10; Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il duce. Lo Stato totalitario 1936-1940* e *Mussolini l'alleato I. L'italia in guerra*, Einaudi, Torino 1996 [1981] and 1996 [1990].

anche in Italia (la biografia Mussolini per eccellenza, scritta dal compianto Renzo de Felice, è un'opera in più volumi, che copre oltre 5000 pagine ed è pubblicata solo in italiano). Nella prefazione, Mack Smith riconosce che "il fascismo italiano era più di Mussolini", ma interpreta comunque il fascismo attraverso la personalità del dittatore[35]. Facendo eco a De Ambris e a Barzini Mack Smith spiega la difficoltà di comprensione di una figura misteriosa e solitaria come il duce, che non aveva amici

> né alcun compagno vicino al quale ha rivelato se stesso in modo naturale e senza ambiguità. Nei suoi rapporti con le altre persone era come se fosse sempre, per così dire, sul palco, impersonando una parte, o meglio recitando una serie ininterrotta e sconcertante di parti che non sono sempre facili da districare e da riconciliare. Oltre a essere un attore di talento, possedeva un talento superlativo di propagandista – un propagandista le cui dichiarazioni e i cui commenti privati e pubblici erano spesso concepiti per nascondere la verità almeno quanto per rivelarla, e questa abilità, anche se funzionò abbastanza bene in un primo momento, è stata alla fine la sua rovina. [36]

L'idea che Mussolini vada considerato anzitutto un attore torna così spesso che gli è dedicata una apposita voce nell'indice. Più avanti si legge per esempio che il duce era essenzialmente una sorta di fannullone che desiderava far credere di lavorare tutto il tempo: "Queste discrepanze si spiegano meglio se si guarda Mussolini come un attore, un dissimulatore, un esibizionista che ha cambiato il suo ruolo di ora in ora per adeguarsi all'occasione". Mussolini cambiava spesso idea, e "dava scarsa importanza alla coerenza delle idee e delle opinioni. [...] Mussolini l'attore", Mack Smith conclude, "viveva sui nervi, con una perpetua tensione di muscoli e della mente solo in parte nascoste da un aspetto esteriore di imperturbabilità" [37].

L'affermazione circa la pigrizia di Mussolini fa oggi semplicemente sorridere: chi abbia lavorato presso l'Archivio Centrale dello Stato, dove sono conservate le carte del ventennio, è costretto a riconoscere che Mussolini vedeva, leggeva, commentava e rispondeva a un numero di documenti stupefacente. Più problematico è il fraintendimento su

[35] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A Biography*, Vintage, New York 1983 [1982], p. xiv.
[36] *Ibidem*.
[37] *Ivi*, p. 112.

che cosa sia l'arte della recitazione e come si applica al comportamento del Capo del governo. Recitazione non è sinonimo di confusione, superficialità, indecisione o di volubilità; non significa nemmeno fare finta di essere a proprio agio quando non lo si è; non è il bluff di un politico; non è bugia di una persona disonesta. Coloro che continuano a parlare di Mussolini come di un attore farebbero bene a ricordare l'osservazione del filosofo inglese e critico George Henry Lewes, il quale nel 1875 scrisse che l'arte dell'attore "è della rappresentazione, non dell'illusione"[38].

Nonostante i molti decenni trascorsi e la patina di oggettività di queste letture, simili caricature di Mussolini non fanno che replicare quelli proposti negli anni Trenta da artisti del calibro di De Ambris. Mack Smith sembra sottolineare il distacco della propria analisi quando osserva che nel corso del tempo le domande sul dittatore italiano sono diventate "meno cariche di passione politica", ma non può sfuggire alla nostra attenzione il fatto che, definendolo continuamente un attore, egli adotti una delle principali strategie usate dagli oppositori politici per screditare il dittatore italiano[39].

Nei settant'anni trascorsi dalla caduta del fascismo, su questo fronte la nostra comprensione non è mutata di molto. Come l'esempio Barzini dimostra in maniera più chiara, il declassamento di Mussolini da capo dello Stato ad attore implica spesso il ricorso a una serie di metafore teatrali enormemente semplificate (o addirittura inesatte) per descrivere il fascismo, e la riduzione del fascismo stesso da sistema politico a mero spettacolo. Luigi Barzini e Denis Mack Smith rappresentano due casi estremi, ma la logica alla base dei loro argomenti persiste in varie forme, come nella tesi secondo cui durante il fascismo non ci sarebbe stato un divismo cinematografico perché l'unica star del firmamento totalitario doveva essere Mussolini (il Rodolfo Valentino della politico), oppure nell'affermazione in base alla quale le sue apparizioni in pubblico "possedevano tutti gli elementi del teatro nel

[38] Cit. in Sandra Pietrini, *L'arte dell'attore dal Romanticismo a Brecht*, Laterza, Roma 2009, p. 47.
[39] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, cit., p. xiv.

senso più classico del termine" solo perchè perché avvenivano in spazi urbani idealizzati come accadeva per le commedie messe in scena nei teatri rinascimentali, oppure ancora nell'osservazione di una biografia di Mussolini tristemente recente, dove si legge che il duce era "soprattutto un superbo prosciutto attore della vecchia scuola capocomico" e una "personalità istrionica" [40]. Che questo tipo di pregiudizi abbiano impedito una vera comprensione dei veri modi in cui il fascismo è salito al potere e ha operato per oltre vent'anni è stato magnificamente dimostrato da Emilio Gentile nel suo *E fu subito regime*: un libro che con una meticolosa ricostruzione degli eventi fornisce una potente replica alle unanimi caratterizzazioni della marcia su Roma come una sorta di "opera buffa", invece che come l'evento politico decisivo che è stato[41].

In realtà, questo approccio è stata sostenuto da una tradizione filosofica che risale al periodo tra le due guerre. L'identificazione tra fascismo e teatro è saldamente radicata nella caratterizzazione del fascismo come "estetizzazione della politica" proposta dal filosofo tedesco Walter Benjamin nell'epilogo del suo saggio sulla *Opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*, che risale alla seconda metà degli anni trenta. Per Benjamin – che nel 1940 si sarebbe suicidato nel tentativo di espatriare dopo l'occupazione della Francia – il fascismo rifiutava alle masse il diritto di modificare i rapporti di proprietà e invece consentiva loro unicamente la possibilità di esprimersi. L'"introduzione dell'estetica nella vita politica" a opera del fascismo (una forma di espressione senza vera partecipazione) servì ad anestetizzare la massa, rendendola incurante della violenza inflittale sino a persuadere i cittadini a "sperimentare la propria stessa distruzione, come un piacere estetico di

[40] Cardillo, *Il duce in moviolo*, cit., p. 35; Diane Ghirardo, "City and Theater: The Rhetoric of Fascist Architecture," in *Stanford Italian Review* VIII. 1-2, pp. 165-193, 188; Martin Clark, *Mussolini*. Pearson, Harlow UK 2005, pp. 1-4. Clark riconosce che "la storia conta anche" ma comunque metta alla base del proprio studio la caratterizzazione del dittatore come "personalità istrionica": la sua logica è quella di Mack Smith, nel senso che, anche per Clark, questo lato del carattere del duce sarebbe la causa di diversi comportamenti disonesti, aggressive, orgogliosi e così via.
[41] Emilio Gentile, *E fu subito regime*, Laterza, Roma 2012.

prim'ordine". [42] Contrapponendo l'estetizzazione (fascista) della politica alla politicizzazione (comunista) dell'estetica, Benjamin ha fornito la legittimazione teorica agli studiosi che negli ultimi decenni hanno limitato le loro analisi del fascismo alla sua dimensione spettacolare. Grazie a Benjamin è stato facile parlare delle numerose adunate fasciste come semplici tentativi di occultare la distruzione del proletariato italiano, e molti studiosi pongono al centro delle loro ricerche la presunta verità secondo cui proprio l'estetizzazione sarebbe stato l'aspetto fondamentale e qualificante della gestione delle masse dal parte del fascismo italiano. [43]

In realtà, a proposito di spettacolarizzazione fascista della politica, c'è molto da dire. Gli studi innovativi di Emilio Gentile e del compianto George Mosse hanno stabilito in che misura l'auto-sacralizzazione del fascismo richiedesse il ricorso a miti, simboli e rituali per creare una comunità nazionale; e, sulle loro orme, alcuni studiosi hanno analizzato in dettaglio questi strumenti. Nonostante ciò, la tesi di Benjamin è stata raramente messa alla prova dagli storici del fascismo e dagli storici del teatro.[44] Piuttosto che indagare seriamente gli usi delle arti teatrali portati avanti dal regime di Mussolini, esplorando i modi in cui ha avuto successo o ha fallito nel tentativo di utilizzare la teatralità e il teatro per ottenere l'estetizzazione di cui parla Benjamin, molto spesso le riflessioni del filosofo tedesco sono stati diluite in argomenti come quello secondo cui il fascismo stesso sarebbe stato solo un'esperienza estetica: teatro e nulla più. L'uso della teatralità da parte del regime e l'accorta messa in scena di se stesso realizzata da Mussolini – il suo "recitare" – sono diventati una prova supplementare del male del fascismo. A sua volta, l'estetizzazione della politica e la

[42] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations. Walter Benjamin Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken, New York 1968, p. 242.
[43] Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1997, pp. 12-13.
[44] Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, Laterza, Roma 1993; George Mosse, *Masses and Man. Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality*, Wayne State UP, Detroit 1987. In un libro del 1963, la studiosa tedesca Hildegard Brenner aveva già dedicato qualche riga all'idea del "Terzo Reich come chiesa politica", ma nel contesto molto limitato; le sue osservazioni infatti riguardavano un singolo spettacolo di propaganda nazista, la *Passione tedesca 1933*, di Richard Euringer. Si veda *La politica culturale del nazismo*, Laterza, Bari 1965.

manipolazione (presumibilmente violenta) delle emozioni del pubblico che essa comporta sono state viste come un metodo intrinsecamente fascista di governare le masse. Negli studi teatrali, nonostante la prevalenza millenaria delle forme di dramma che puntano a scatenare le emozioni del pubblico, questa logica è diventata un luogo comune anche per la profonda influenza dell'opera teorica e drammaturgica di Bertolt Brecht, al cui nome è legato l' "effetto di straniamento" del teatro epico: una tecnica sviluppata appositamente "per obbligare lo spettatore ad assumere un atteggiamento di indagine e di critica", come antidoto al "grottesco fascismo che enfatizza le emozioni"[45].

Per quanto una simile formula appaia confortante, essa è tuttavia storicamente problematica: anche se non vi è dubbio che i raduni di massa hanno avuto un peso nell'ampio consenso ottenuto dal regime fascista per ben quindici anni. Ma è un errore immaginare che il ventennio sia stato costruito attorno a quelle riunioni in piazza che, pure, fornivano i momenti (potenzialmente) più efficaci della estetizzazione della politica. "Contrariamente a quanto sostiene la vulgata", ha giustamente ricordato Bosworth,

> Mussolini era un dittatore a tempo pieno. La storia, specialmente nel mondo anglosassone, si ricorda soprattutto la sua retorica e implica che il dittatore era così occupato a parlare che gli rimaneva poco tempo per qualsiasi altra cosa. In realtà, invece, il Duce era, per la maggior parte del tempo, un assiduo burocrate [...] Una volta assunta la carica di Primo ministro, l'oratoria era più un hobby che un impegno giornaliero[46].

Qualcosa di simile si può dire per gli italiani. Le visite che il duce compiva nelle più svariate città di provincia costituivano un evento raro, e la maggioranza degli italiani erano molto più abituati a vedere il duce in un cinegiornale o a sentire la sua voce dalla radio che a vivere l'emozione di ammassarsi nella piazza del paese in quelle riunioni che, secondo il luogo comune, avrebbero inebriato le masse inermi. In parole povere, il fascismo (e l'esperienza che il popolo ne ha fatto) è stato molto di più di questo. Certo, l'insistenza

[45] Bertolt Brecht, "The Description of a New Technique of Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett, Hill and Wang, New York 1992 [1964], pp. 136, 145.
[46] Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, cit., pp. 352-53.

sull'ordine e sulla disciplina tanto nella educazione fascista quanto nelle attività ricreative (visibile in slogan fascisti come "Credere, Obbedire, Combattere"), la pervasività dello stato di polizia, e la volontà delle camicie nere di usare la forza per imporre la sottomissione forniscono un solido contrappeso all'idea che il regime abbia investito tutte le proprie energie a dissimulare la violenza.

Inoltre, se il cammino della storia ci ha insegnato qualcosa, è che questa equazione risulta troppo ampia. Come ha scritto Russel Berman, "una politica spettacolarizzata che preclude la comunicazione razionale appare in molti contesti del XX secolo, che non dovrebbero essere etichettati come fascisti, se l'obiettivo è quello di mantenere una qualsiasi specificità storica nell'uso del termine"[47]. Ma anche prima di arrivare a chiederci se l'estetizzazione della politica sia di per sé sufficiente a distinguere il fascismo dagli altri movimenti politici, dobbiamo prima essere consapevoli dei punti ciechi che un'eccessiva enfasi su questa formula crea già quando ci si concentra sullo stesso movimento di Mussolini. Anche su questo punto l'autorità è Emilio Gentile, che, come si è detto, è stato tra i primi a riconoscere il ruolo fondamentale che l'estetizzazione ha giocato nella concezione totalitaria che Mussolini ha avuto della politica. Al tempo stesso, però, Gentile ha ritenuto necessario mettere in guardia gli studiosi, segnalando che l'assioma di Benjamin

> può essere fuorviante se si perde di vista l'altro aspetto più importante che fu tipico del fascismo, cioè la *politicizazzione dell'estetica*, che non solo ispirò l'atteggiamento del fascismo verso la cultura, ma fu all'origine stessa dell'incontro fra avanguardia modernista e fascismo, e fu il motivo della partecipazione di molti intellettuali modernisti al fascismo. Questa considerazione può apparire ovvia, ma è pur necessaria per richiamare l'attenzione su questo aspetto del fascismo, per evitare che l'insistenza sull'"estetizzazione della politica" possa condurre ad una sorta di "estetizazzione" del fascismo stesso, relegando in secondo piano la sua *politicità*.[48]

Naturalmente, è questo il problema col quale occorre confrontarsi qui. Sino ad oggi

[47] Russel A. Berman, "The Aestheticization of Politics: Walter Benjamin on Fascism and the Avant-Garde," in *Stanford Italian Review* VIII. 1-2, pp. 35-52, 51.
[48] Emilio Gentile, introduzione alla nuova edizione, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista 1918-1925*, Mulino, Bologna 1996 [1975], p. 27

l'ascesa del regime e la sua caduta sono state spiegate come uno spettacolo che ha privato tanto il gerarca quanto la popolazione di un pensiero critico. Nelle riflessioni sulla estetizzazione del regime il teatro non ha funzionato come un serio oggetto di indagine, ma solo come una comoda metafora per affrontare (senza riuscirle ad affrontare veramente) questioni problematiche come il carisma o il consenso di massa. Queste letture hanno relegato la politica – le scelte individuali, gli sviluppi sociali e i metodi di governo – alla periferia. [49] Ma una soluzione del genere ci condanna a non muoverci dalla semplice spiegazione del fascismo come aberrante alterità – un poco secondo la celebre formula di Benedetto Croce a proposito della "parentesi nella storia italiana".

Ma la tragica fine del ventennio – quello vero, che ha condotto gli italiani a una guerra civile di due anni, ha visto 7500 ebrei italiani deportati verso i campi di sterminio e si è concluso con la fucilazione di Mussolini e l'esposizione del suo cadavere appeso per i talloni in una piazza milanese – è la più grande prova che non ci sono stati attori di questa storia. I personaggi possono morire sul palco, gli attori no. Rimane molto da dire su Mussolini e il teatro, e non vi è alcun dubbio che l'abile estetizzazione della politica e il talento oratorio del duce hanno contribuito alla longevità e al successo del regime. Ma la tendenza a leggere il fascismo stesso come esperienza estetica – ripiegando su una metafora consunta – serve soltanto a occultare il problema. Pensare a Mussolini come attore non fa avanzare molto la comprensione della sua dittatura.

Avanziamo invece nella comprensione di Mussolini, della sua politica estetica e, più in generale, del funzionamento del regime, quando osserviamo il teatro in tutti i suoi aspetti. O quando, per porre la questione nei termini che verranno utilizzati in seguito, guardiamo Mussolini non come un attore, ma come uno spettatore, un critico, un impresario, un drammaturgo, un censore, e persino come un personaggio, dal momento che in momenti

[49] A questo proposito, Aurelio Lepre sostiene che la biografia di Mack Smith, con un'enfasi così forte sulla personalità del dittatore,"gli ha fatto spesso perdere di vista le motivazioni politiche delle sue azioni." *Mussolini*, Laterza, Roma 1998, p. 120.

diversi della sua carriera politica ha svolto ognuno di questi ruoli. Mussolini era un grande appassionato del teatro, un assiduo frequentatore della platea, un lettore curioso dei testi drammatici, e, come Primo Ministro, un deciso sostenitore del settore teatrale in Italia. Sotto la sua guida, infatti, il teatro ha goduto di un appoggio governativo senza precedenti.

Eppure, nonostante l'importanza che il teatro ha avuto nel progetto di costruzione di una comunità nazionale perseguito dal regime, per motivi di cui si discuterà più ampiamente nelle conclusioni, questo argomento non ha ricevuto l'attenzione che merita. Negli ultimi decenni, da quando la comunità accademica ha finalmente superato il pregiudizio secondo cui fascismo e cultura erano concetti incompatibili, si sono moltiplicati gli studi sulla produzione culturale del regime, soprattutto negli Stati Uniti. Ma il teatro come forma d'arte è assente da queste indagini, da *Fascist Modernities* di Ruth Ben-Ghiat a *The Patron State* di Marla Stone, sino alla recente *Storia della cultura fascista* di Alessandra Tarquini. Dove il teatro appare, come in *The Culture of Consent* di Victoria de Grazia, o nella raccolta a cura di Günter Berghaus *Fascism and Theatre* (una raccolta di saggi che si occupano anche della Germania nazista, della Spagna di Franco e della Francia di Vichy), in genere la discussione rimane limitata alla regolamentazione giuridica, alla censura, all'organizzazione burocratica e ai temi propagandistici: al teatro come istituzione ma non come una forma d'arte. Una tesi che implica per forza di negazione che quando si parla di fascismo, l'arte non è in discussione.[50]

Mussolini, Man of the Theatre intende offrire una risposta a questo stato di cose, nel tentativo di pensare il teatro sotto il fascismo in tutta la sua complessità, politica ed estetica. Questa tesi è un primo piccolo passo verso un progetto molto più ampio che mira anzitutto ad integrare le analisi sulla gestione pratica del teatro da parte del regime con le analisi sui

[50] Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2001; Marla Stone, *The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy*. Princeton UP, Princeton 1998; Alessandra Tarquini, *Storia della cultura fascista*, Mulino, Bologna 2011; Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent. Mass Organization of leisure in Fascist Italy*. Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1981; Günter Berghaus, ed., *Fascism and Theatre*, Berghahn, Oxford 1996. Va nominato, come eccezione, il libro di Jeffrey Schnapp, *Staging Fascism. 18BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses*, Palo Alto, Stanford UP, 1996, sullo spettacolo di propaganda *18 BL*.

risultati artistici di questa opera, nel tentativo di prestare particolare attenzione ai modi complessi in cui questi due campi si intrecciano. Anche se Mussolini non è stato l'attore che molti gli hanno imputato di essere, è stato – senza ombra di dubbio – un uomo di teatro. E proprio perché era così interessato alle sorti del teatro, Mussolini si è imposto facilmente come il fulcro ideale da cui partire nella ricostruzione delle scene italiane tra le due guerre. Il mio studio si compone così di quattro capitoli: un capitolo biografico di contestualizzazione della vita di Mussolini raccontata attraverso i suoi rapporti col teatro (soprattutto come spettatore, anche se, come vedremo, dal momento in cui è diventato Capo del governo per lui assistere a una rappresentazione ha sempre avuto implicazioni più ampie), più tre capitoli rispettivamente sul duce come critico, come impresario dei cosiddetti "teatri di eccezione", e come censore.

Il capitolo su Mussolini critico è cruciale anche da un punto di vista metodologico, perché confuta tutte le ipotesi che il dittatore fosse ignorante, incolto o disinteressato a questioni culturali e di ricerca intellettuale: respinge, in breve, la tesi di Mack Smith secondo il quale le sue "pretese culturali erano abbastanza innocue e indicano che aveva delle buone intenzioni, ma non può essere preso troppo sul serio" [51]. Al contrario, nelle pagine che seguono, Mussolini viene preso seriamente in quanto lettore e spettatore di drammi e commedie. Si è cercato anzi di sottolineare i modi in cui un uomo come lui, impegnato nella *vita activa* sin dai suoi primi anni, sia stato attratto soprattutto dagli aspetti politici di quelle opere, e in effetti si sforzò di rinvenirli con grande acutezza anche quando questi non erano immediatamente evidenti. Il capitolo in questione interpreta le preferenze del duce per autori quali Gabriele d'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello e George Bernard Shaw come strettamente legate alla sua filosofia politica e soprattutto al suo interesse per il superuomo di Nietzsche, per la superiorità dell'azione sulla contemplazione e – non a caso – per gli aspetti rituali della

[51] Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, cit., p. 132.

politica. Tratta anche dei rapporti del duce con i drammaturghi (compreso Massimo Bontempelli), e spiega come questi rapporti influenzarono sia la sua interpretazione del loro lavoro sia il trattamento da lui loro accordato in quanto professionisti. Professionisti che potevano tornare utili al regime ma anche trarne a loro volta vantaggi. In questo modo, il capitolo è basilare per il resto del lavoro, dal momento che le considerazioni personali, ideologiche e pratiche di Mussolini che appaiono in questo sede sono essenziali per interpretare le politiche teatrali del fascismo.

Il terzo capitolo, dedicato a Mussolini come impresario - e, in particolare, come sostenitore morale e finanziario del Teatro d'Arte di Luigi Pirandello e del Teatro degli Indipendenti e del Teatro delle Arti diretti da Anton Giulio Bragaglia – è un tentativo di ampliare le discussioni degli studiosi sulla sovvenzione da parte del regime al teatro di prosa. Tali discussioni vertono quasi interamente ai progetti per un "teatro di massa" sviluppati come parte di un più generale tentativo di fascistizzare i cittadini. Esse tendono a concentrarsi sulla funzione puramente propagandistica del sostegno accordato dal regime; il capitolo, pur riconoscendo questo aspetto, mira principalmente a dimostrare che, con il sostegno fornito a questi due maestri del teatro moderno, Mussolini diede comunque un contributo fondamentale al teatro come forma d'arte e soprattutto alla educazione di una generazione di registi che avrebbero continuato la brillante tradizione del teatro d'avanguardia nell'Italia del dopoguerra. In tal modo, intendo di mostrare come il grande teatro italiano di questi anni non si sia sempre necessariamente sviluppato *nonostante* il regime, ma a volte, almeno in parte, *grazie* a esso.

Come si è già notato, studiare la censura fascista è una scelta piuttosto tradizionale. Le norme relative alla messa in scena sui pubblici palcoscenici hanno ricevuto una buona dose di attenzione, perché se c'è una cosa che possiamo aspettarci dal regime, era proprio la mano pesante nella censura. Da questo punto di vista, il quarto capitolo è il più prevedibile e

apparentemente meno originale. Anche in questo caso, tuttavia, si cerca di complicare l'interpretazione tradizionale, affrontando la censura non per quello che prescriveva sulla carta, ma per il modo in cui essa è stata applicata nella pratica dal duce e dal funzionario statale ufficialmente preposto a questa funzione, il prefetto Leopoldo Zurlo. Qui prendo in considerazione la miriade di fattori che potevano determinare la sentenza finale, e in alcuni casi fornisco una discussione approfondita delle stesse opere, nel tentativo di dimostrare che anche alcune delle principali categorie adoperate per discutere oggi la censura fascista - come la distinzione tra infrazioni "politiche" e infrazioni "morali" - sono insufficienti per la comprensione del processo, che era molto più complesso e, di fatto, interessante di quanto gli studi attuali non ci permettono di immaginare.

Il capitolo dedicato alla censura, che si basa in parte sulla *Memorie inutili* pubblicato dal censore dopo la guerra, offre l'opportunità per dire almeno qualcosa sulla questione delle fonti. Questa tesi mi ha imposto di intraprendere una ricerca estremamente vasta, che ha richiesto non solo una integrazione delle fonti secondarie e primarie – molte di queste ultime raccolte da numerosi archivi sparsi in tutta Italia, negli Stati Uniti e nel Regno Unito – ma anche di materiali teatrali e non. Traggo le mie informazioni da libri di storia, biografie, saggi letterari e teatrali, interviste, testimonianze contemporanee, memorie, periodici di ogni genere e da esplorazioni iper-specializzate delle minuzie sulla storia del teatro.

Ognuna di queste fonti ha le sue insidie; una delle più grandi sfide della odierna ricerca sul ventennio è resistere all'impulso spontaneo di ritenere sospetto qualsiasi elemento di prova prodotto da un fascista o, addirittura, che potrebbe darci un'immagine "positiva" del regime, delle sue attività e dei suoi personaggi - e soprattutto del duce. Si tratta però di un impulso che occorre controllare. Capisco fin troppo bene l'impulso di prendere ogni prova "negativa" a disposizione e di usarla in vista di un grande processo a Mussolini e al fascismo. Eppure non è questo il compito dello storico. Allo stesso modo, riconoscere l'intelligenza del

duce o le sue "buone intenzioni estetiche" non equivale ad adottare una sorta di presa di posizione filo-fascista. Riconoscere che Mussolini e il suo governo aspiravano – dal loro punto di vista se non dal nostro – a elevare la cultura del popolo italiano non significa in alcun modo giustificare o perdonare il fascismo; ma è piuttosto un modo per avvicinarsi a un momento straordinariamente complesso e tragico della storia europea nei termini che gli sono stati propri e nella speranza di comprendere veramente qualcosa di più sul modo in cui il fascismo ha funzionato. Tocca allo storico disporre tutte le carte sul tavolo per quanto inquietanti esse siano. A volte, nel corso della mia ricerca, ho dovuto spesso riconoscere che le mie ipotesi venivano messe in dubbio da un commento inatteso o da un documento rivelatore. Il funzionamento dello Stato fascista come appare dalla pratica teatrale del ventennio risulta assai più complicato di quanto si possa immaginare; ed è importante per me portare questa complessità alla luce. Ma il lettore vedrà che l'analisi di questa complessità non porta mai alla conclusione revisionista secondo la quale, dopo tutto, il regime "non era poi così male". Molto spesso le nuove scoperte ci portano a riconoscere un fascismo sì diverso, ma per certi versi anche più spaventoso e insidioso di quello sino a oggi immaginato.

La conclusione propone un approccio diverso al teatro del ventennio rispetto a quello adoperato nei capitoli precedenti, e sposta l'attenzione dagli interventi diretti di Mussolini a una visione d'insieme, in modo da collocare ogni evento esaminato in un contesto più completo. Essa affronta questioni storiografiche lasciate finora inesplorate e indica la direzione futura che intendo dare alla mia ricerca.

Chapter One: Mussolini, a Life in the Theatre

Playwright Rino Alessi got his start on the boards acting in the school plays at the Giosuè Carducci boarding school in Forlimpopoli, Italy, a small town in the Northern region of Romagna. He would forever fondly remember playing the Official Thomm in *Il trionfo della giustizia* on January 27, 1901, for onstage next to him as the Inspector General Gregor was his good buddy, Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini. Beloved composer Giuseppe Verdi died that day, and the headmaster – who was brother of the poet for whom the school was named – decided a speech should be delivered in his honor. Such an important task would have to be entrusted to someone articulate and bright – one of the older pupils, certainly – and Carducci knew the choice was clear: the young Mussolini. He was sometimes a bit too rambunctious for anyone's good, but the faculty liked him nonetheless, for his quick and lively intelligence. What was more, the boy had already proven his oratorical prowess in the school yard; he was the son of a local blacksmith named Alessandro, who had talents of his own when it came to stirring up his revolutionary socialist comrades (he, too, tested the patience of authorities).

Carducci apparently wanted to give Benito some time, and initially had announced that the commemoration would take play several days later. But after some thought, the pupil declared himself ready to go on that night. He couldn't give his headmaster the text beforehand, though: he was going to improvise. So after his performance in the *Triumph of Justice*, he took the stage once again. He was heartily applauded. Young Comrade Mussolini's impromptu discourse revealed a knack – however uncultivated – for swaying the crowd, but even more importantly, shows an early instance of his propensity to see things politically, for out of the homage to Verdi the future duce crafted a discussion of unification-era Italy. In short, the eighteen-year-old Mussolini took advantage of the moment, of the

theatrical event (which provided an audience), and the beloved composer's reputation as a patriot (which provided a sense of shared identity), to make the stage on which he spoke a political one.[1] This he would do ever more frequently, and soon political agitation would become the center of the young man's activities. And as on this occasion, his political interests would mix with cultural ones: indeed, the young socialist never really saw a division between the two.

In 1909, as a contributor to the Italian Swiss Socialist newspaper, *L'avvenire del Lavoratore*, he found himself in the guise of theatre critic. We might called one of his articles "Mussolini's advice to the players." He reviewed a performance of *Il bastardo* at a local *Camera del Lavoro* (TradeUnion Headquarters), followed by the farce *Un matrimonio per punizione*, which he judged "esilarante, sebbene un pò lunga," and the future duce proved to be a demanding critic, even if presenting himself otherwise:

> La compagnia – specie nella prima parte del programma – ha dimostrato una preparazione insufficiente. Non si può, cari attori, né si deve aspettare sempre la battuta, qualche volta replicata dal suggeritore. Bisogna studiare la parte, anche per maltrattare il meno che sia possibile la lingua italiana. Ciò detto – non a guisa di rimprovero critico, ma come amichevole consiglio – constatiamo che fu recitata assai bene la farsa.
> Il compagno Campolongo – alquanto impacciato nel dramma – fu invece brillantissimo nella farsa. Il tutore, la pupilla, e la nobile vedova, nonché il confidente di Lauretta, disimpegnarono con abbastanza garbo e disinvoltura la loro parte. Ed ora, a una prossima rappresentazione, ci auguriamo di essere costretti a elogiare, senza restrizioni, tutta la compagnia.[2]

Noteworthy, of course, is the extent to which the already admired orator spoke as an expert on public self-presentation. But here, too, is not only the orator but also the journalist, writer, and reader of poetry whose attention goes toward the Italian language, which was not to be abused.

---

[1] Sante Bedeschi and Rino Alessi, *Anni giovanili di Mussolini*, Mondadori, Milano 1939, preface; Giorgio Pini e Duilio Susmel, *Mussolini. L'Uomo e L'opera* I. La Fenice, Firenze 1953, p. 56 and notes. Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, Einaudi, Torino 1995 [1965], p. 14; De Felice stresses the future dictator's natural inclination to the turn a cultural event into a political one.

[2] Benito Mussolini, "Teatro alla Camera del Lavoro," 18 February, 1909, in *Opera Omnia*, II, Ed. E. and D. Susmel, 35volls. Firenze: 1951-63, p. 30. Hereafter *Opera Omnia* signaled as *OO*.

As a journalist, Mussolini made no small contribution to the changing face of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). In 1910, the Party gasped for air; its newspaper, *Avanti*, suffered the lack of oxygen, and, ousted from Austro-Hungarian territory after having been in Trent for seven months, a 27-year-old Mussolini had returned to Italy and took up writing from his own provincial rag, *La lotta di classe*. He tackled the question – never mincing words – and often did so with a (not entirely creative) theatrical lexicon: "Si tratta come Amleto di essere o non essere. Oggi l'*Avanti* è vicino al secondo corno di questo dilemma. Il suo stato è comatoso." His judgment on the Party itself wasn't any better: "C'è qua, sul palcoscenico della commedia politica della terza Italia un gran cadavere: il Partito Socialista ufficiale […] Bisogna seppellirlo?" In the eyes of the party directorship, Mussolini was practically a nobody, but he was as charismatic as he was strange, and he ensured the party its 500 votes from his little province of Forlì.[3] His tenacity and vociferousness paid off, though: at the Socialist congress in July of 1912, it was clear that he had already risen in the ranks to become the leader of the party's revolutionary wing and, named director of *Avanti* in November, in effect of the party as a whole. He had already earned himself the nickname of "duce" and had become the darling of Italian Socialism. He took up residence in Milan.

There in the city that writer Massimo Bontempelli would immortalize as the "industrious" one, long, intense days were capped off with diverting nights: Mussolini loved to celebrate his victories in political duels by going to the puppet show, and there was never a shortage of contests to win, for these were tumultuous times. Suddenly turning his back on internationalism and antimilitarism, a few months after the eruption of the Great War he declared himself in favor of Italian intervention in the conflict; he founded *Il popolo d'Italia* to promote the cause and hoped to rally his comrades. He was instead ejected from the Party. It may have seemed his fall from grace, and yet it was his redemption: the paper was the

[3] Gherardo Bozzetti, *Mussolini direttore dell'"Avanti,"* Feltrinelli, Milano 1979, pp. 19-29.

organ that would call a new group of revolutionaries to arms – many of whom would in 1919 become the *Fasci di combattimento*, the first fascists.

The battle raged beyond Italy's borders, but in native dailies as well: after "making spaghetti" in the evenings – the code he and his wife Rachele used to refer to the duels his mother in law didn't want to know about – it was off to the puppet show, or any number of shows. In fact they went to the theatre all the time, the rebel journalist and his young wife, for in Milan there were plenty of comedies and the variety stage, not to mention the puppet theatre and the opera, which, as a violinist, the duce particularly loved.

But going to the theatre with Benito was embarrassing. He was terribly excitable, an unforgiving spectator. Unimpressed or bored with a play, he ridiculed the piece and its actors, hooting and hollering to make his displeasure known. His boisterous behavior called all sorts of attention to them, and when Rachele lamented, telling him to write about it in the paper but not make a scene, he defended himself with the air of the entitled: "I go to the theater to be entertained. If I'm not entertained, I say so."[4] The young woman who had seen her first play only in 1910 evidently got to know her husband's tastes – and Milan's theatre scene – quite well; when she foresaw that a show might provoke him, she invented the clever solution of sending him to the playhouse with his mother-in-law in her stead. This happened exactly once. The poor woman couldn't stand the embarrassment of being with a man who took off his shoe and threw it an actor who wasn't up to snuff. She refused ever to return. But Mussolini liked going to the theatre, and he didn't like going alone. Rachele took the trouble to find him another female companion, and she prudently selected a rather plain creature; from that moment on Benito opted to go by himself. After the war, when Mussolini returned injured from the front after a grenade explosion, he and his wife made a compromise. He would behave, and she could return happily with him to the theatre. Most often, it was the

[4] Rachele Mussolini, *The Real Mussolini*. Saxon House, New York 1973, p. 37.

Fossati, for the operetta. Everyone was happy, Signora Mussolini would later reminisce: those were amusing, cheerful years.[5]

Had her Benito learned his theatre etiquette from his pal Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the other futurists – in numerous ways his kindred spirits? He was, after all, known to have attended their legendary performance *serate*, which often resembled public brawls as much as high entertainment. Already in January of 1909, the Italian premiere of Marinetti's *La donna è mobile* in Turin had been called "not a performance, but a battle, pandemonium, chaos,"[6] paving the way for the *serate*. From 1910, these events, made up of poetry and manifesto declamations and presentations of new futurist art, invited spectators to talk back to Marinetti and cohort. They so often began with, were interrupted by, and concluded in fights – both food and fist – that the provocateurs had to find new ways to get their ideas heard over the din of *teppismo* they had themselves incited. Mussolini forged a bond with the futurists in these years; they shared a desire for a revolution that was as much about a lifestyle as it was about politics, and had led the charge for intervention in the war, being arrested together in April of 1915 at a demonstration in Rome. In those days, strategizing, Marinetti frequently hung around the duce's office, sometimes even sleeping on the couch.[7]

The war experience was crucial in the creation of Mussolini *fascista*; just a year after returning from the front, in March of 1919, he would form his *Fasci di combattimento* movement, which translates as groups of combatants. It was aptly named, for its leader appealed to two groups in particular: the *interventisti*, who had fought for intervention in the war partly because they believed that, in the futurist's infamous words, war was the "world's only hygiene," – that which would render possible social revolution – and the *arditi*, those

[5] *Ivi*, p. 47.
[6] Günter Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 32.
[7] For Marinetti and Mussolini's relationship, see Yvon De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani*, ed. Francesco Perfetti, Mulino, Bologna 1990; F. T. Marinetti, *Taccuini 1915/1921*, ed. Alberto Bertoni, Mulino, Bologna 1987; Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, Clarendon, Oxford 1998; Emilio Gentile, *"La nostra sfida alle stele." Futuristi in politica*, Laterza, Roma 2009.

storm troopers who came home from the carnage avowing that radical reform and violence, rather than parliamentary democracy, were the route to strengthening the Nation, to staving off Bolshevism and the socialists who had had cast Mussolini out, and to reclaiming the territories denied Italy by the Treaty of Versailles despite her victory in the war.[8] This "mutilated victory" was a powerful call to angered patriots, especially when the poet and playwright Gabriele d'Annunzio occupied the city of Fiume, one of the lost territories, calling for its annexation. On September 11, 1919, coming out of the theatre, Mussolini was handed a letter from the Vate (as he came to be known) announcing that he and legions of *arditi* followers were on the move: "Mio caro compagno, il dado è tratto. Parto ora. Domattina prenderò Fiume con le armi. Il Dio d'Italia ci assista."[9]

Still, there were only about 100 who had gathered for the first meeting of the *Fasci* on March 23, 1919 in a building in the Piazza San Sepolcro in Milan (for this reason these "fascists of the first hour" were ordained the "*sansepolcristi"*). In November, the elections seemed like the movement's death knell: they lost miserably. The registers recorded 37 groups (*fasci*) in all of Italy, with a total of only 800 members.[10] What was more, a decisive shift to the right after this electoral failure meant that many allies would walk away: a number of the futurists, d'Annunzio, the *arditi*.

However, this shift, along with the beginning of a decline in the Socialist party and increased support by the bourgeoisie who saw their interests being protected by fascist squad violence (*squadrismo*) against the socialist proletariat, resulted in rapid growth for the

[8] See Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, Laterza, Roma 2008 [2002], pp.8-9: The war experience, Gentile writes, "fu decisiva per la sua conversione dal socialismo marxista e internazionalista a un eclettico nazionalismo rivoluzionario, che affermava il primato della nazione sulle classi, e combatteva i fautori di una rivoluzione socialista sostenendo la vitalità del capitalismo produttivo e la necessità della collaborazione di classe per accrescere la ricchezza e la potenza della nazione. Finita la guerra, Mussolini, con il suo giornale, divenne il principiale fautore di una rivoluzione nazionale per portare al governo una nuova classe dirigente formata dai combattenti. Dopo aver tentato invano di assumere la guida dell'eterogeneo interventismo di sinistra, unificandolo sotto la bandiera della Costituente, Mussolini lanciò all'inizio del marzo un appello ai reduci per dare vita ai Fasci di combattimento. Nacque così il movimento fascista."
[9] Rachele Mussolini, *The Real Musssolini*, cit., p. 43; *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini 1919/1938*, ed. Renzo De Felice and Emilio Mariano. Mondadori, Milano 1971, p. 9.
[10] Gentile, *Fascismo*. *Storia e interpretazioni*, cit., p. 10.

movement: by July of 1921 – in just over two years – the blackshirt ranks had risen to a staggering 200,000. In the elections of May 1921, they won thirty-five parliamentary seats. An edgy year followed, with several heated conflicts among the fascist leaders vying for preeminence; at the Rome conference in November of 1921, it was finally agreed that it was time the movement became a party, and Mussolini emerged victorious, recognized as undisputed even if unofficial leader. Il Duce.

From then on, his star would only rise. In October of 1922, Mussolini began a heavy push to oust the current Prime Minister Luigi Facta and gain control of parliament – by force if necessary. And it might be, for if it were possible for fascism to take power legally, its very character as a party-militia made it incompatible with the parliamentary system. An assiduous reader of Machiavelli, one of the greatest lessons he had learned was to never let the moment pass by. The fascist quadrumvirate of generals (Italo Balbo, Emilio De Bono, Cesare Maria De Vecchi, and Michele Bianchi) feared the militia was underprepared, and Mussolini, initially wary, knew that if they failed to grasp the *attimo fuggente* their chances were lost (as Goethe had taught), and so he relented to the pressures of Michele Bianchi, who was most in favor of pushing forward. Plans were underway, and action was planned for after the fascist convention, scheduled for the 24th, in Naples.[11]

There in the Parthenope city, a determined duce called his men to arms. He did so from the stage of Teatro San Carlo. By all accounts, it was an impressive oration, perfectly calibrated to stir the crowd, but avoid frightening the government into counter-action. Indeed, the communist newspaper reports called bluff: the blackshirts were barking, but they wouldn't bite. Margherita Sarfatti, then Mussolini's mistress, would later boast of her lover's bravura, and of the others' failure to take him at his word: "queste parole, non grosse ma grandi, scandite sillaba per sillaba con voce pacata e gesto fermo tagliente, furono intese per

[11] See Gentile, *E fu subito regime*, cit; Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il fascista. I. La conquista del potere, 1921-1925*, Einaudi, Torino 1966, chapter four.

metafore di retorica: erano realtà concrete."[12] Not just the speech, but the convention itself served to mask the big movements underway: for this reason Emilio Gentile has argued that the theatrical fiction surrounding the March on Rome wasn't the March itself, but Naples, which kept everyone from thinking the fascists were up to something bigger.[13]

Returning to Milan on the 26th, the duce stepped off of the stage and took his seat in the boxes again, but this wouldn't make him less of a political agent. This very important spectator would nevermore escape the gaze of the rest of the public, and this he often worked to his advantage. That evening, the 26th, he went to the opera with his Margherita[14]: Wagner wasn't to be missed (even if years later he would say that the composer, apart from *Lohengrin, Tristano e Isotta*, and *Tannhäuser*, bored him).[15] The next night, he went to the Manzoni instead, to check out Molnar's *Swan.* "Mussolini, oblivious of the stares of the audience, struck a pose familiar to all who knew him. His chin propped on his white, almost feminine hands, he stared darkly forth across the theatre like a bulldog peering from its kennel."[16] Once again, this was a ruse: who would think the blackshirts were up to no good, if their mastermind was whiling away the hours at the playhouse?

And yet they were. The squads of Pisa, Florence, and Cremona were on the move. In Rome, De Vecchi and Bianchi took it up on themselves to start making proposals for new parliamentary leadership. Facta had already been informed the day before that the fascists were maneuvering: their message for King Vittorio Emanuele III was that only his ordering the prime minister's resignation would stop the march on the capital city. But the King, who wasn't in Rome, was left in the dark too long: he arrived there only when Mussolini settled into his seat at the Manzoni. Sarfatti that night was at the theatre, too; this time she was with

[12] Margherita Sarfatti, *Dux.* Milano, Mondadori 1934, p. 261.
[13] Gentile, *E fu subito regime*, cit., pp. 153-56.
[14] Collier, *Duce!*, cit., p. 28.
[15] Petacci, *Mussolini segreto*, cit., p. 191. Cfr. Emil Ludwig, *Colloqui con Mussolini*, trad. Tomaso Gnoli, Milano, Arnaldo Mondadori 1970 [1932], p. 132.
[16] Collier, *Duce!*, cit., p. 28.

her parents, and like so many others watched the duce in his box above. If the night before he had positioned his chair further back in the darkness so as not to be seen with his paramour, tonight it was crucial that he be seen by one and all. And so he sat with his bulldog eyes in plain view – calm and attentive by some accounts, "riveted" by others – until the second act. As Sarfatti would later dramatize the affair in her sensationalistic biography, *Dux*, then one of his journalists appeared to him, quivering: "'Direttore, hanno telefonato. È cominciato.' Il direttore si alzò calmo e rapido. 'Ci siamo. Addio'. Dileguò."[17]

The next morning, October 28th, Mussolini took the train to Rome: the night before, Facta had turned in his resignation – it's unknown whether the King accepted it – but was, strangely, calm enough to go home and go to bed. Alarming news came in to the Ministry of the Interior all through the night, though: phones rang off the hook with reports of the fascist occupation of prefectures and of trains full of armed men descending on Rome. The Ministers met early that morning, having roused Facta from his slumber, and scrambled to devise a strategy and compose the order, which the King would sign, declaring a state of siege: Rome was to be protected from the blackshirt militia. But when the Prime Minister took that decree to the King, he refused to sign. Today, it's still unclear why. In part, he would later claim, "perché gli italiani non si scannassero fra loro."[18] More wrangling, negotiations, strong-arming, and compromises ensued. On the 30th, Mussolini presented his list of cabinet members to the King for approval. On the 31st, he gave his first speech as Presidente del Consiglio. An armed insurrection wouldn't have been necessary to take power; but it was necessary to single that this wasn't just a government changeover, but the establishing of a new regime – a real revolution. It was symbolic, but very real.[19]

"Cominciò per me un'esistenza totalmente nuova," he wrote about becoming Prime Minister (in the "autobiography" actually written by his younger brother Arnaldo in 1928,

[17] Margherita Sarfatti, *Dux,* cit., p. 261.
[18] De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista. I,* cit., p. 360.
[19] Emilio Gentile, *E fu subito regime,* cit., p. 141.

with suggestions and materials provided by Benito and fully reviewed and edited by the bigger of the two):

> […] Abbandonai tutto ciò che mi teneva legato alle fortune del mio giornale; mi separai da tutto ciò che poteva avere il minimo carattere personale. Mi dedicai totalmente, completamente, ed esclusivamente al lavoro di ricostruzione. Oggi non è cambiato nulla. […] In questi sei anni, con le eccezioni dei pranzi ufficiali, non ho mai oltrepassato la soglia di un salotto o di un caffè. Ho abbandonato quasi interamente anche il teatro che una volta mi sottraeva utili ore di lavoro serale.[20]

It's not hard to believe that this would have been the case in the first years after the rise to power. Donna Rachele would remember the duce's tendency in those years, when he did attempt to see a play, to push back his chair, close his eyes, and drift off to sleep as soon as the house lights dimmed. These were, in effect, trying, even dangerous times for the new Head of Government.

In 1924, the Mussolini government faced a crisis that could have brought about its demise: the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti. On May 30, the Socialist parliamentarian had given a speech denouncing blackshirt violence and the irregularity in the recent elections that had given the fascists an overwhelming majority in the house. Despite brutal attacks on him in the past, he spoke undeterred, needling the fascists with an accusation that their approach humiliated Italy in the world's eyes: "Noi deploriamo invece che si voglia dimostrare che solo il nostro popolo nel mondo non sa reggersi da sé e deve essere governato con la forza." He felt his life was in danger – he told his colleagues to prepare his funeral oration – but he pressed on.[21] As he prepared yet another denunciation, ten days later, he was kidnapped. In a protest against fascist violence, and an apparent attempt to force the King to replace Mussolini as Prime Minister, the senators of the opposition abandoned Parliament, in the episode known as the Aventine secession. Matteotti's body was found in August. Public

[20] Mussolini, Benito, *La Mia Vita*, Rizzoli, Milano 1983, pp. 147-49.
[21] For Matteotti's speech and an introduction to the event, see Gabriele Pedullà, *Parole al potere,* cit., pp. 322-38.

outcry was strenuous; the prohibition of a public funeral didn't stop the people from gathering to pay their respects; even some fascist supporters were mortified: Mussolini's men were clearly to blame… what had his role been?

Whatever it was, he took full responsibility for the crime. In one of his most legendary speeches, on January 3, 1925, he denied any role in the affair, or, for that matter, any recourse to stupid or unorganized violence (which needed to be "chiurgica, intelligente e cavalleresca" to be worthwhile), but turned a declaration of fault into a celebration of fascism's revolutionary success: "se tutte le violenze sono state il risultato di un determinato clima storico, politico, morale, a me la responsiblità di questo, perché questo clima storico, politico, morale io l'ho creato…" It was a rather diabolical declaration, for he went on to suggest that he had wanted things pushed to their extreme, and the extreme was the position they were now in, with the Aventine. But it was the absent parliamentarians, he claimed, that stoked the anti-fascist violence that had erupted in the past few months. All of this needed to stop: peace needed to be found, above all amongst members of the government. The tranquility the Italian people needed would be given to them. With love if possible, with force if necessary. With this act, the duce emerged from the crisis as victorious as ever, as several attempts on his life suggested, and would consolidate a one-party, dictatorial power bolstered by legislation, referred to as the *leggi fascistissime* (the super-fascist laws) contracted in 1925 and 1926.

Despite the sacrifice he described, the theatre – physically going to the theatre – would remain instrumental to the practice of politics. Mussolini's appearances as a spectator remained frequent enough and would become even more significant than they had been on the night of October 27, 1922. Never was it so true that going to the theatre was about seeing, but also about being seen. Spectating became an integral part of, to borrow for just a moment from the unhappy metaphor, playing the role of the duce. If we give into the temptation to

speak of Mussolini as an actor, in fact, these are the only terms in which we can do it: he knew he was always under observation, and therefore every public – but even semi-private – appearance contributed to the image that Italy and the world had of Benito Mussolini, duce of fascist Italy. If George Orwell gave to us an enduring picture of totalitarianism centered on the notion of Big Brother watching, here is an opportunity to reflect on the reciprocal: watching Big Brother.

Sometimes it was all too much. Too tiring. Too irritating being the perennial star of the show. Even worse than falling immediately asleep, for a man who loved the theatre like he did, was that, as the cult of the duce took flight, the reactions to his entrances – in Rachele's words, "hysterical" – drove Mussolini away from the playhouse. Having sealed an accord with the Catholic church in 1929, conquered an empire with the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 (adding to territories acquired in the liberal period), and implemented ever stronger Ministerial structures and propaganda machines throughout his time in power, by the late 1930s Mussolini was at the height of his fame and popularity: a sort of Statesman-Elvis.

Over time, then, the Capo found his trips to the play and opera house more taxing. He had the privilege of organizing recitals and film screenings at the family home in Villa Torlonia, but the pleasure of going to the theatre would never be quite the same. In the late 1930s, nonetheless, there was still one siren whose song led him there: Claretta Petacci, the young woman whom he had met in 1932 and become intimate with four years later – the one who would give up her life to love of him, being killed by the partisans during the civil war that ravaged Northern Italy from 1943 until the dictator was dead, strung up by the heels in Milan's Piazzale Loreto, with Petacci and some of his hierarchs by his side, on April 29, 1945.

Petacci's diaries confirm Donna Rachele's observations: the duce who once had been undeterred by the public's gaze in his shoe-throwing and other exploits grew agitated by

those eyes always on him when he simply wanted to see a play. Claretta, who was 28 years her lover's junior and obsessively jealous (as was he), wrote several times of going to the theatre, where the game of glances between her and Benito was the real reason to attend a show: another chance for the desperately insatiable couple to see each other in a given day, if only from afar. But the rest of the theatre could see them, too.

There was, for example, January 4 of 1938, when Claretta's invitation to him to go to the theatre was met with resistance, which she interpreted as someone (Rachele, we must imagine) having "prohibited" him. He reluctantly agreed, therefore, to prove he could do as he wished; but in a later phone call (sometimes there were a dozen a day), he gave her strict instructions to behave: "Però io rimango sempre dentro al palco, non esco. Tu non devi salire su, capito? Io non mi muoverò da dentro perché non voglio assolutamente fare lo spettacolo nello spettacolo." But this was a fate the dictator wouldn't escape. Like Margherita Sarfatti before her – Sarfatti, a Jew who would flee Italy when the anti-Semitic racial laws went into effect – the young lover wouldn't take her eyes off of the duce in his box above. Nor would she obey the command to stay in the orchestra below. She went upstairs every chance she got, just for a peek; his wife was sometimes there, but that didn't matter. And even during the show, with he above and she below, their eyes were only on each other. In her diary, Claretta recorded every glance, every smile, every other woman whose gaze rested on the man she unhappily shared not only with his wife and countless flings, but with the Nation as a whole:

> Al terzo [atto] mi trattengo di più ed è contento, mi guarda tanto con tenerezza. Alla mia destra c'è una cinquantenne che lo fissa con l'occhialino, dev'essere una vecchia amante. Lui non so se la vede. Durante lo spettacolo mi guarda tanto con desiderio. Si alza in piedi dietro la moglie e fa per tirarmi un bacio. Mi guarda sempre, anch'io.

The titillation of the all-too-public private encounter, however, wasn't enough for the voracious and obsessive pair. On the phone late that night, he told her, "Amore, quanto ti ho guardato. Hai veduto che ti guardavo sempre, ti amavo tanto. Pensavo: per lei, per questa

piccolo bambina, in questo teatro non ci sono che io. […] per me in questo teatro non esiste altra donna che lei." In another call the next afternoon he would already reminisce: "Come ti guardavo. Non ho capito nulla neanche del dramma, sentivo solo la musica che mi è molto piaciuta."[22]

A month later, he would warn her again to be careful: once his son had noticed her loitering outside his box: "E per far resistere il nostro amore bisogna evitare pubblicità." That evening, she would only pass by quickly, but with enough time to notice a "stupid little blond" staring at him. He scowled at Claretta from his above this time, and motioned to her to cover her naked shoulder with her shawl; when she did, he smiled tenderly, and caressed his face, as he would hers if she were beside him instead of Donna Rachele. Various other times they would discuss going to the theatre, but he said he was too tired to close himself in that box.[23]

Most ironic about it all is that, for Mussolini, the love triangle of French bourgeois drama was the symbol of all that was wrong with the theatre (I'll have occasion to talk about this further on); and yet, if he hated watching that sort of stuff on stage, he couldn't help but play out a *pochade* of his own when he settled into his box at any of the theatres of Milan, in the early years, or Rome, where, as head of government, he moved in 1922. I don't want to get carried away with the amusement of the Mussolini bourgeois farce, though, despite what it has to tell us about the dictator's state of mind in the late 30s, the proportions that the cult of the duce had reached, and even his enduring interest in theatrical performance. Lurid biography aside, the important point here is how the duce, even when he just wanted to spectate, was for everyone always the star of the show.

[22] Petacci, *Mussolini segreto,* cit., pp. 144-47.
[23] *Ivi*, pp. 200-201. The Petacci diaries recount seven visits of Mussolini to the theatre in 1937 alone; the published diaries, however, are selected and abridged, and it is therefore possible that there were a number of other evenings in the playhouse. Mussolini also attended at least three other performances in his official capacity that year. This frequent attendance is especially noteworthy given that both Mussolini and his wife spoke of his flight from the theatre.

For many theatregoers, we have to think, it was the mere fact of being in the same small (or large) crowd with him that excited them. If – as I'll address in the conclusion – the regime would invest heavily in theatrical performance as a contribution to its attempts to building a new national community, the Capo's participation in such events was crucial. His attendance at performances would be highly publicized: he gained as much attention as the show at the Teatro d'Arte in 1925; in 1929 he was spectator of honor at the inauguration of the Roman *carro di tespi* (thespian truck) tour at the Villa Borghese; he wouldn't miss d'Annunzio's *La figlia di Jorio* directed by Pirandello for the international Volta Conference on the dramatic arts in 1934 (he sent the Vate his own mini-review); later, much ado would be made over his arrival at a concert in the Basilica of Maxentius, where he would pay his own ticket and take a place in the middle of the crowd rather than one of the reserved VIP seats; that same year – in 1937 – playwright Aldo De Benedetti had the honor of seeing his play performed for the working class masses at the Teatro Argentina as part of the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro's new program, the *Sabato Teatrale*, with the duce in attendance; in Libya, Mussolini sat front and center in the newly restored Roman theatre of Sabratha for *Oedipus Rex*; with his family, he attended the opening of the season (*Il Trovatore*) at the Teatro dell'Opera, rebuilt by famed fascist architect Marcello Piacentini in 1928.

For the men and women of the Italian theatre, though, having the duce in the audience meant something different. Mussolini the spectator was always Mussolini the critic, and this was of no small significance, for his opinion was one that was taken very seriously. A smile or a frown on that imposing face, or a kind word spoken, thespians believed, could change their fate. Sometimes they were right: the duce-critic could become duce-impresario (and this was good) or duce-censor (and this was bad) in the blink of an eye. There were a great many fascist faithful among theatre folk, and they weren't shy about seeking the Capo's approval –

for the satisfaction of it as much as for the potential practical benefit. Examples we will see throughout this study.

But there were few, perhaps, as relentless as Roman *capocomico* (actor-manager) Gastone Monaldi and his wife Fernanda Battiferri. Monaldi earned his fame in the silent cinema (born in 1882, he was a year older than Mussolini) and by playing and writing sketches starring gangster characters, in Roman dialect. Later, with Fernanda by his side, they decided to act in Italian, too; the carried on this activity for years, even if with less success than they had had with their renderings of the *malavita romana.*[24] With the help of local fascist authorities, they began touring little towns in 1926, alternating Italian and dialect pieces: Monaldi was perhaps one of the inspirations for the itinerant *carri di tespi* program the regime would launch three years later, for he had certainly gained the attention not only of provincial officials, but of the duce himself.[25] This because the actor-manager persisted, even taking his father (a Marquis and opera impresario) along when requesting appointments with the duce.

The *capocomico* considered the mission of his company, The Teatro del Popolo, propagandistic even if its plays weren't explicitly so – for Mussolini had expressed "legittime riserve" about that type of production – and he wanted nothing more than to please the duce, as he wrote to him after their meeting, in June of 1927:

> Non chiesi mai e non chiedo aiuti materiali, vorrei solo che VOI MAGNIFICO CONDOTTIERO di nostra stirpe, pioniere possente di nostra civiltà, Vogliate donare a me, attore modesto ma Italianissimo, una solo parola la quale mi dica che la mia fatica non è giunta e non giunge alla E.V.Ill.ma ignota e sgradita. Questa VOSTRA parola, DUCE, imprimerà al mio cuore al mio cervello nuova lena per continuare in questa aspra eppure così gloriosa via del TEATRO POPOLARE ITALIANO, Teatro che tanta parte occupa nel VOSTRO altissimo cuore di Soldato e di Artista.[26]

[24] Francesco Possenti. *I teatri del primo novecento*, Lucarini, Roma 1987, p. 192.
[25] Emanuela Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale e politca del teatro nell'Italia fascista*. La Nuova Italia Editrice, Firenze 1989, p. 112.
[26] ACS, SPD CO 509.103, b1018. All following Monaldi correspondence comes from this source.

Mussolini asked that a letter be prepared, and we can only imagine the joy such a character would feel when it arrived, praising him – for the theatre was one of the most direct means of reaching the hearts of the people, and "Ella, per il valore e la forza della sua arte, è uno degli attori più amati." As icing on the cake, to the typewritten letter, the duce added a handwritten "Accolga i miei cordiali saluti."

Monaldi was clever, though, and a bit of an extortionist. The party officials he came into contact with could well have thought that the actor had grown too fond of the gangster types he played on stage, for while he didn't ask the duce for funds, he brandished the letter from him in an attempt to coax money from provincial offices. Things had come to such a head just a few month later, in October, that Giacomo Suardo – Mussolini's Undersecretary – ordered the Director General of the Police force to give Monaldi an official warning: desist from asking the Party and public entities for money, and especially from "spendere così leggermente il nome delle 'altissime personalità' che secondo lui appoggerebbero la sua iniziativa"!

Evidently, though, Monaldi wasn't a timid sort. In celebration of the company's anniversary the next year, he wrote to ask for a photo of the duce; internal correspondence noted that he had already been given one. In July (we're in 1928), he asked to be received again, to tell the dictator some things about the workings of the theatre world that only he, Gastone Monaldi, was capable of sharing: granting the meeting would have been "il premio alle mie fatiche d'artista e di organizzatore." It was denied. The following January, he finally managed to see the duce again, taking his father with him and sitting in his waiting room until he was given an appointment. In June (now 1929), he received yet another friendly request to conclude his activity after a conflict with officials in the Val d'Aosta: how was this possible, he wrote to Mussolini, when his attitude toward Monaldi was one of benevolence? When the duce himself had told him, in January, "RICORDATEMI AI MIEI

LAVORATORI!"? The letter was, naturally, a request for Mussolini's intervention on his behalf. But an urgent plea for help when the company was about to disband just a week later, a telegram sent to Mussolini's secretary Chavolini, was ignored. Evidently the Capo wasn't as impressed – or invested – as Monaldi would've had everyone believe.

Mussolini's *deus ex machina* would come, in fact, only in the actor's final hours. A desperate Fernanda began to beg in 1931: her husband was gravely ill, and she needed money not only to dissolve the company of actors, but to transfer him to a clinic in Rome. The duce allocated 5000 lire. He then agreed to 1000 more, "nonostante tutto," Chavolini noted. But Monaldi died before he could be transferred, and it was decided that the 1000 be given to the family anyway. When Fernanda wrote again, asking for 20,000 lire more, Mussolini acquiesced – but set a limit of 10,000. It wouldn't be the first or last time that an important figure of the stage would receive posthumous recognition of the sort from the Capo del governo.

Gastone and Fernanda were a good pair. She would surface again in 1937, this time echoing her late husband's initial correspondence with the duce: all she wanted was his opinion. She sent a letter to his secretary, now Osvaldo Sebastiani, with a play she had written: *Verso l'avvenire!* (*Toward the Future!*). This woman knew how to toot her own horn: it was a work, she wrote, that everyone recognized was "l'unico lavoro nel quale la storia fascista sia raccontata con una grande dignità di intendimenti artistici e tecnici. […] Tutti riconoscono che NESSUNO ha mai scritto fino ad ora niente da paragonare al mio lavoro." For all of these reasons, it was "inutile che Voi lo mandiate per competenza al Ministero della Stampa e Propaganda." This was pure grandstanding, though, as the play had already been submitted and received clearance by the Ministry censor in 1934; what's more, the boasting was followed by a rather confused counter-argument: only the duce could say if the work was worth anything at all. She therefore asked Sebastiani to read it and, if he

considered it worthy, to pass it on: “Ritengo che sia necessario che S.E. Il Capo del Governo legga il ‘Verso l’avvenire!’ poiché è stato scritto per LUI ed è di LUI che si parla. Sono i Suoi sentimenti più intimi e le Sue Persone più care che agiscono nel Suo nome, dunque è LUI, Lui soltanto che dovrà dire se la mia opera è degna di vivere oppure dovrò bruciare il manoscritto.” In the archive, there is no trace of a response. This is just one of many instances in which the duce – who captured so many imaginations – would become character in a play of his own.

The moment in which Benito Mussolini, as duce, came closest to being an actor, to turn once again to that ubiquitous and problematic notion, was in his very final days. On April 27, 1945, traveling with German military forces, attempting to escape capture by the Partisans, he, too, donned a Nazi uniform, in an attempt to avoid being recognized. His performance failed; he was apprehended; the next day, she was shot to death. On the 29th, his body would appear high above the crowds once more, but this time as a cadaver, strung upside down in a Milanese piazza.

Chapter Two: Mussolini the Critic

Il poeta è quasi sempre il profeta della nuova èra – Mussolini

Il poeta può cantare la rivoluzione fascista, ma non dovrebbe farlo apposta – Luigi Pirandello

When Mussolini landed in Trent in February of 1909, his reputation preceded him, for better and worse: "Intemperanze verbali mi resero indesiderabile alle autorità svizzere,"[1] he would later euphemize about the time he had spent in Switzerland in 1902-04, when he was arrested several times and expelled from the cantons of Geneva and Lusanne. So, too, when he arrived in Trent, police were on the lookout for the dangerous revolutionary, while the *Camera del Lavoro* that had hired him to be secretary and to direct its weekly newspaper, *L'Avvenire del Lavoratore*, touted the arrival of the impassioned propagandist who, quite cultured, knew German perfectly – a clear asset in the Trentino, a largely Italian-speaking region of the Austro-Hungarian empire. In that paper and other local rags, comrade Mussolini wrote copiously and widely: party bureaucracy and organization didn't totally satisfy him, but the agitation of political partisanship and social-cultural interventions he found rather exciting, and so he penned everything from play reviews and pieces on poetry and drama to articles about philosophy and politics. Mussolini wasn't just a skilled pulpiteer, it turned out: at Trent, like in Geneva and Lausanne, the words that flowed from his pen caused a stir, and in just a few weeks politics there were turned on their head. Seven months later, he'd be thrown out of the region.

One of his pieces was an essay on Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* – he excerpted it from the *Studi critici della letteratura tedesca* he was preparing and published it in *La Vita Trentina*. Mussolini had a special passion for German culture in general, and the drama of that period he especially prized. "From the beginning, my husband greatly admired Germany," Rachele later recollected: "not the land of their Reich, perhaps, but the country

[1] Benito Mussolini, *La mia vita*, cit., p. 40.

that had given the world Beethoven and Wagner, Kant and Nietzsche, Frederick II and Bismarck, Goethe and Schiller, Luther and Marx. It was they who had been his spiritual masters and shaped his pattern of thought."[2] Goethe's *Faust*, in fact, was one of his favorite dramas, as would recount the German doctor assigned by Hitler to be the duce's personal physician in those last tormented years when his health collapsed along with both the fascist and Nazi regimes. The duce was fond of reciting poetry aloud – in original languages from Latin to English to French – but had a special penchant for declaiming long passages, from memory, of that masterpiece about the great mind who had sold his soul.[3]

There was a whole lot about Schiller's sweeping drama – which premiered under Goethe's supervision in 1804 at Weimar – that would've appealed to the Italian journalist; at this point he was no nationalist, and yet it's hardly surprising that a man of humble origins who considered himself "disperatamente italiano"[4] and resided in irredentist Austro-Hungarian territory would appreciate the story of Tell, the Swiss peasant who rebels against an Austrian tyrant, for *Wilhelm Tell* is the tale of Switzerland's fight for independence from the Hapsburgs but also of the rebellion of "the people" against the wealthy Austrian despot. It may have been Goethe's Mephistopheles to most expressly celebrate the *attimo fuggente* with his declaration, "Who grasps the moment as it flies/ He is the real man,"[5] but Schiller's play rendered the notion in magisterially dramatic fashion, having Tell not once but twice launch his arrow – first into the apple on his son's head and then into the villain's heart – while everyone else is too busy conversing to even notice him taking aim.

Though his article did discuss virile heroism and contain socialist themes, however, it was principally dedicated to the play's female figures. In it he celebrated the "grande virilità di propositi" with which Gertrude urges her reluctant husband Werner Stauffacher – pacifista,

[2] Rachele Mussolini, *The Real Mussolini*, cit., p. 138.
[3] Georg Zachariae, *Mussolini si confessa.* BUR Rizzoli, Milano 2004, p. 53.
[4] Mussolini, *La mia vita*, cit., p. 46.
[5] Goethe, *Faust* I, ed. and transl. Charles T. Brooks, Ticknor and Fields, Boston 1856, p. 97.

"un pò comico nella sua timidità quasi fanciullesca," and "lasciatemelo dire, piccolo-borghese," he wrote – to rebel against the Austrian Imperial Governor Gessler. In Gertrude, Mussolini the critic saw a heroic female who was an exception to the rule: like Joan of Arc, she was courageous and combative, and this in marked contrast to Tell's wife, Edvige (also the name of Mussolini's sister), "più donna" precisely because she was naïve and affectionate, and begged Wilhelm not to rebel – not to go to war.[6]

The author didn't hide his preference for the exceptional, bellicose woman and highlighted how she was a comrade: her insubordination was a call to arms against "il signore di tutti," as her "disprezzo dei beni fugaci della terra" was a counterpoint to her husband's petty-bourgeois protection of his personal property. In Mussolini's reading of the play, even Gertrude's urging Werner to suicide – a way out for the weak – was a mark of the heroic "disprezzo della vita e sete di libertà" that the futurists, too, had exalted the month before in the Manifesto that launched their movement.[7] After surviving a 1938 assassination attempt by a Swiss man, Maurice Bauvaud, Adolph Hitler felt quite differently than Mussolini did about the play, lamenting the fact that Schiller had immortalized the "Swiss sniper" of an Austrian despot, and ordered the popular play barred from the stage.[8] But it stands to reason that in 1909 the future duce, committed as he was to heroic action that would bring about revolution, celebrated the belligerent women of Schiller's tale.

That *Wilhelm Tell* merited attention as a political play is indisputable, but Mussolini's interest in it on these grounds is significant here because it represents an approach to drama he would forever hold. He was anything but deaf to aesthetic questions, but the political conclusions to be drawn from dramatic works would wholly condition his responses to them and their authors. Mussolini wasn't a man of culture comparable to the intellectuals of the

[6] Mussolini, "Figure di donne nel *Wilhelm Tell* di Schiller," 13 March 1909, in *OO* II, pp. 32-34.
[7] *Ivi*, p. 34.
[8] Gail Hart, "Schiller the Killer: Wilhelm Tell and the Decriminalization of Murder," in *Goethe Yearbook* Vol. 12 (2004), pp. 197-207.

day; but, as Emilio Gentile has noted, his culture – that of a "man of action" – wasn't at all inferior to that of his contemporary politicians. And it was as a politician that Mussolini read and studied: he tended to adopt ideas that confirmed his intuitions or offered solutions to the problems that concerned him. In short, "sapeva dare, alle idee che assimilava, un accento proprio, e fonderle in una visione personale della vita."[9] Nothing confirms this hypothesis like a portrait of Mussolini the theatre critic; a remarkable consistency of vision distinguishes his theatrical predilections and, where it is possible to know them, his analyses of the works and writers who most interested him. The dictator tended, essentially, to read through a personalized lens that allowed him to see in dramatic works renderings of his own political philosophy. In certain areas, like philosophy, history, and literature, he was well versed, and his elaboration of the issues and themes that interested him have a great deal to teach us about fascism's ideological core and the regime's governing strategies – on cultural issues and non. Moreover, as already suggested in the previous chapter, Mussolini the critic's judgments influenced the work of Mussolini the impresario, dramatist, and censor, impacting the theatrical programming of the *ventennio*, as we will see throughout the present study.

When he became Head of Government, of course, Mussolini wouldn't do much writing about theatre and drama, so commentaries like the one on Schiller and public pronouncements aren't easy to come by. Instead, we have to rely on interviews, private letters, and the testimonies of contemporaries. One of these is extraordinarily revealing. The duce read widely and with vivid interest, and when his gaze fell across a work he thought wasn't half bad, he let its author know. This was the case with the verse tragedy *Simma*: in 1934, he used the respite of Christmas and Saint Stephen's holiday to read the play and write to its author, Francesco Pastonchi.

Caro Pastonchi,

[9] Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia*, cit., pp. 61-62.

nel silenzio propizio e notturno di Villa Torlonia ho letto la vostra tragedia: l'ho letta con calma, soffermandomi su ogni pagina, talora su qualche verso.

Dal punto di vista letterario la tragedia è bella, la sua trama afferra: dialogo, cori, movimenti delle masse sono tali da suscitare l'interesse e l'attenzione del pubblico. Anche commuoverlo.

Al fondo del dramma è un'antitesi: Simma-Brea; bianco-nero; maestro-discepolo; passato-futuro; aristocrazia-massa; l'antitesi sbocca nella rovina del tempio.

Dal punto di vista teatrale (è per il teatro che l'avete scritta, la tragedia: non per inchiuderla nelle pagine di un libro) un pericolo esiste ed è la forma "poetica" del lavoro.

Gli artisti finiranno per cantare, come se si trattasse di un'opera lirica, alla quale manca soltanto un po' di orchestrazione. Canteranno. C'è il rischio di stancare gli uditori. Bisognerebbe "tradurre" in prosa la vostra tragedia: intendo una prosa secca, lineare, disadorna quale dovrebbe essere la prosa dei costruttori, architetti, maestranze di Pontia.

Ed ora qualche rilievo. Quel Batiello che voi chiamate emporiota, non è tutto sommato, che un esercente e per essere un esercente (sia pure ex sportivo) parla troppo fino, sino a dire "*piú magno del suo magno maestro*".

Anche i suoi battibecchi colla Cecia sono "esercenteschi" all'estremo. A pag. 26 non mi piace che voi definiate la "vittoria come una bestia con una lunga coda di nostalgia verso la tana". Riflettete e troverete che l'immagine non è bella. A pag. 119 voi parlate della vita come "di una imbandita di molte vivande". Anche questo non è bello. Se fossi in voi, io, a pag. 121 toglierei quelle "faccie feroci di fede" che potrebbe ricordare ai maligni (i quali non mancano mai) le "faccie feroci" di borbonica memoria.

Qualcuno potrebbe osservare che sono troppo vaghi a pag. 122 i versi nei quali voi dite che "*una cosa creata è un silenzio scaro a cui si torna sempre*". A pag. 121 io toglierei questi due versi non degni della Vostra Musa "*Davanti a noi che abbaglia e ci conduce – Vittorioso è un angelo di luce*". A pag. 165 i due versi "*Una febbretta, o spavaldo ed eccoti sorcio in trappola*" non sono all'altezza degli altri che precedono e seguono in quella scena di forte pathos. Altre piccole osservazioni si potrebbe fare qua e là, ma di fronte a questi rilievi, stanno moltissime, bellissime e nuove immagini.

Sono sicuro che in ulteriori letture voi perfezionerete ancora il testo. (Caressez votre phrase: elle finira pour vous sourire – A. France).

Altro problema di primissimo ordine dato il carattere della tragedia: la messa in scena.

Conclusione = trovate una compagnia ed io vi aiuterò perché il lavoro sia dato nel prossimo aprile a Roma, all'Argentina.

Ed ora, prima di salutarvi molto cordialmente, vi prego di non prendermi alla lettera come critico letterario, o teatrale che dir si voglia.[10]

The letter is an argument in favor of taking the duce's critical capacities quite seriously: it demonstrates his competence and sense of security in literary matters; it reveals his ability to

[10] Cited in Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il duce. I. Gli anni del consenso (1929 – 1936)*, Einaudi, Torino 1996 [1974], pp. 28-29; Letter conserved in ACS SPD CR Autografi del Duce, b.7, fasc. XII.

distinguish between literature for the page and a blueprint for the stage and in turn identify the special considerations of live performance; it highlights his stylistic preferences (for direct and simple prose like his own, conceived as that of the builders of the new Italy); and, finally, it lays bare the slippage between critic and impresario. Good fortune could come to he who impressed the duce, we see here. (While Pastonchi kept the text in verse, he did alter some of the lines in question; and there were special government funds allocated for a production of *Simma*.[11] In 1939, the author also became member of the Italian Academy of Intellectuals.)

But, in the end, the best way to evaluate the duce's tastes and critical point of view is to begin with his own canon: those playwrights whose dramas he particularly appreciated or whose paths crossed with his in meaningful ways. Mussolini would never lose his taste for Verdi, Goethe, or Schiller, but the dramatists who interest us here are the "moderns": the critic's contemporaries, to whom he would be drawn for clear philosophical and socio-political affinities. Of greatest importance to our discussion are Gabriele d'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello, and George Bernard Shaw, as well as Massimo Bontempelli, who is today lesser known but during the *ventennio* was one of Italy's chief intellectuals. Each of these writers was absolutely anti-bourgeois in spirit, if not in class category. They desired drastic political change and believed it would take a heroic figure to bring it about. Accordingly, most of them were as anti-democratic in their impulses as the Capo was.

Gabriele d'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello, and George Bernard Shaw were international all-stars and Mussolini's declared favorites. They each in varied ways explored philosophies of the will and can in many ways be seen as the promoters of the same Nietzschean philosophy that Mussolini was so taken with and that was foundational to his political methodology; indeed, though we don't have the confirmation in all three cases, there is good

[11] Gianfranco Pedullà, *Il teatro italiano nel tempo del fascismo,* Mulino, Bologna 1994, p. 151.

reason to believe that this was the primary motive of the duce's interest in them and thus it is in this way I will speak of their works here. Massimo Bontempelli is a case apart: like d'Annunzio, he was an ally from the nineteen-teens, and a writer whom Mussolini particularly esteemed. We don't know much of what he thought of Bontempelli's theatrical works; but, given his importance as a playwright and theorist, and as a promoter of what he hoped would become a particularly fascist form of aesthetic modernism, it is worth dedicating some space to him here as a fascist intellectual more generally, and one who had a revelatory relationship with the leader of what they hoped would be a real revolution.

Triumph of the Will: Nietzsche in d'Annunzio, Pirandello, Shaw

For Mussolini, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche offered a response to "questo periodo angoscioso e tragico di crisi che attraversa la coscienza europea nella ricerca di nuove fonti di piacere, di bellezza, d'ideale": this he would write in "La filosofia della forza," published as a series of articles in *Il pensiero romagnolo* in November and December of 1908, the year after *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Birth of Tragedy* had been released in Italian.[12] (Prior to that point, much of what Italians knew of Nietzsche, they had learned from none other than Gabriele d'Annunzio.) Fundamental to the fascist vision, in fact, was the very sense of crisis: the regime, with a vitalist and anti-bourgeois conception of the world would lead Italians out of the spiritual vacuity of an increasingly consumerist – materialist – modernity. Under Mussolini's guidance, the fascists would create a new man. Their revolution wasn't just socio-political, but in this sense, anthropological.[13]

Several thinkers – philosophers, historians, sociologists – shaped Mussolini's conception of the new man, as well as his vision on how he might be created. Nietzsche, of course, was fundamental, for it was the German philosopher's *Übermensch* that provided his

[12] Mussolini, "La filosofia della forza," in *OO* I, p. 184.
[13] On the concept, see Pier Giorgio Zunino, *L'ideologia del fascismo. Miti, credenze, e valori nella stabilizzazione del regime,* Il Mulino, Bologna 1985 and Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazioni*, cit.

aspiration. In a world where God was dead, Nietzsche auspicated, the Superman would create new values. Breaking free from the "herd mentality" that governed the lives of the "last man," who lacked ambition and courage, seeking only comfort and social harmony, this superior being would learn to fully master himself and achieve his earthly wants. The ultimate goal of humanity, for Nietzsche, was the production of the Superman. Likewise influential for the duce was French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon, whose 1895 *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* fascinated Mussolini and formed his conviction that the ignorant and unruly masses needed a strong hand to guide them – to *mold* them – into a race of citizen-warriors, in effect, of Supermen. (Benjamin's identification of the aestheticization of politics, discussed in the introduction, as central to fascism's action on the public stemmed from the fact that the duce did in fact see the crowd as formless, irrational putty to be managed – even crushed – by his capable Superman hands.)[14]

The duce clearly envisioned himself a (potential) Superman and also part of a greater historical mechanism. As he would tell Yvon De Begnac, whose interviews with the duce provide precious materials for knowing Mussolini's mind and will oft be cited here, Nietzsche had taught him "che esiste una possibilità, sempre drammatica, di avvicinare l'uomo meno indottrinato ai sacri misteri della filosofia e ai profani modi di risolverne con la magia."[15] By example, the Superman created this possibility, and, for Mussolini, herein lay revolution. "Non si concepisce un individuo che possa vivere avulso dell'infinita catena degli esseri," he wrote:

> Nietzsche si sentiva la "fatalità" di questa che potrebbe dirsi legge della solidarietà universale e per uscire dalla contraddizione, il superuomo Nietzscheano – l'eroe Nietzscheano il guerriero saggio e implacabile – costretto a risparmiarsi all'interno – scatena la sua volontà di potenza

[14] With Ludwig, Mussolini spoke explicitly of his interest in Le Bon's theories, and also of the aversion he sometimes felt for the masses: "E lo scultore non spezza talvolte per ira il marmo, perché questo sotto le sue mani non si plasma secondo la sua intuizione?," he asked. Ludwig, *Colloqui,* cit, p. 132.
[15] De Begnac, *Taccuini,* cit. p. 384.

> all'esterno e la tragica grandezza delle sue imprese fornisce ai poeti – per qualche tempo ancora – materia degna di conto.[16]

This last point interested Mussolini quite a bit: the "profoundly anti-German" German philosopher's greatest invention was the Superman, and his will to power was that which gave life purpose. As the most "genius spirit" of the previous quarter century, Nietzsche had left an indelible mark: "gli artisti di tutti i paesi, da Ibsen a d'Annunzio," had found in his philosophy "il germe e la ragione di ogni rivolta e di ogni atteggiamento morale e politico." The trauma for Nietzsche – but also for Mussolini, Ibsen, and d'Annunzio – was that the superman was yet to arrive. "Il superuomo sarà," Mussolini wrote, but of those "free spirits" who understood the Nietzschean return to ideals, as of yet "non v'è pur anco traccia nel seno delle nostre società." The Superman's struggle to exist, to surpass, Mussolini evidently sensed quite acutely; he would find the theme again and again in the works of the playwrights he read, and liked.

Gabriele d'Annunzio è come un dente marcio o lo si estirpa o lo si ricopre d'oro .
–Mussolini

From a certain point of view, they could almost seem kindred spirits: growing up, Gabriele, too, was a rambunctious and insubordinate student – more brilliant than Benito – whose special something had his teachers proclaiming that he was destined for greatness, and already "dedito tutto a farsi un grande nome."[17] Young d'Annunzio adored Napoleon and would go on to become a disciple of Nietzsche, whose notions of the will to power seemed to correspond so well to his own life philosophy. Gabriele, too, made a precocious debut: Mussolini had been moved to turn a speech on Verdi into a political statement at age 17, but d'Annunzio one-upped him by publishing his first poetry, including an ode to King Umberto, at 16 – many years earlier, for he was twenty years Mussolini's senior, born in 1863. (But he,

[16] Mussolini, "La filosofia della forza," cit., pp. 174-81.
[17] Annamaria Andreoli, introduction to Gabriele d'Annunzio *Tutte le novelle*, Mondadori, Milano 1992, p. L.

too, was so moved by Verdi's death that he toured, speaking about the deceased composer.) The duce's insatiable passion for women was matched by the poet's: this aspect of the latter's personality has been immortalized, in the museum at his Lake Garda villa, the Vittoriale degli Italiani, by a nightshirt with a conveniently-placed hole edged in gold lame, and by several testimonies, including a servant's spirited observation, "if it weren't for the women, my boss would've written the bible, too."[18] And like the duce who ignored his men's advice that flying wasn't the wisest thing for the Capo to do, the poet-soldier – a Great War hero, and volunteer enrollee at the age of 52 – thrilled in the aeroplane even after losing vision in his right eye due to a crash landing: one of his most famous stunts was the 1918 flight over Vienna, a propagandistic demonstration of Italian aerial power. That eye would ache him for the rest of his days, like Mussolini's ulcer and war-wounded left leg. They had lone wolf tendencies both, and in 1924 d'Annunzio wrote Mussolini that they had grown closer because "anche tu sei *solitario* come io sono solitario. Anche tu delle tue tristezze fai la tua forza cruda."[19] They both knew, after all, that solitude marked the Superman's existence.

When their relationship began in the late 1910s,[20] the poet was a legend, Mussolini an up-and-comer. He wrote to the Commander using the ultra-formal "voi" and expressing his "devozione grandissimo," "ammirazione fortissimo," and even his submission ("Sono ai vostri ordini") as he asked him to write on current political affairs for *Il Popolo d'Italia*: "La vostra altissima parola non può tardare. Pronunciatela! Milioni di italiani l'attendono." [21] They were on the same page for the burning questions: both had been ardent supporters of the interventionist cause and, after the Treaty of Versailles certain that Italy had to do something about its "mutilated victory": this was the conviction that inspired d'Annunzio to march on

[18] Tom Antongini, *D'Annunzio Aneddotico*, Mondadori, Milano 1939, pp. 19, 154.
[19] *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., letter 129, p. 90.
[20] Their first personal contact is dated to the end of 1918, when we know that d'Annunzio wrote to Mussolini; the duce's response begins the collected correspondence extant today. (Their first known face-to-face meeting took place in Rome in June 23, 1919). It should be noted, however, that when d'Annunzio died in 1938, Mussolini spoke of their 23-year relationship. which would date it to 1915.
[21] *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., letters 1-12, pp. 3-7.

Fiume in September of 1919, an occupation that would last nearly sixteen months and end disastrously, with Italian forces casting the Comandante's out in the *Natale di sangue* – Bloody Christmas – of 1920.

It was during his occupation of the "martyred city" that d'Annunzio established his Nietzschean-inspired theatrical conception of politics and a political style that paved the way for Mussolini's March on Rome and twenty-odd year stint as fascist Italy's duce.[22] Before Mussolini came along, it was the elder d'Annunzio who stirred the crowds from balconies above: waving flags and speeding airplanes served as spectacle while choral chants and dialogue with the crowd filled the scripts of the leader's near-daily speeches. His techniques he had outlined in literary works, including the drama *La Gloria* (1899) and the novel *Il Fuoco* (1900), and their success he vaunted with Mussolini, writing once that "lo spettacolo fu stupendo, nella vecchia piazza popolesca" and then several months later, "Ieri parlai chiaro alla folla 'con la spada nella bocca' tra la commozione di tutti."[23]

For all of this, d'Annunzio is remembered as John the Baptist to Mussolini's Christ. He was a *Vate*, so much more than either great poet or a particularly flamboyant war hero; he was the high priest of Italian patriotism, a charismatic spiritual leader to boot (if in a mystical rather than religious sense). To communicate the status of epic proportions the poet had reached during the *ventennio,* I need only recall an anecdote recorded by fascist hierarch Giuseppe Bottai, who visited a school named after Anita Garibaldi, the daredevil wife of the Unification's most beloved hero, and asked a little girl there if she knew who the woman was. "The husband…" she began, to Bottai's questioning amusement. Yes, indeed, "the husband… of Gabriele d'Annunzio!"[24] The poet was rewarded handsomely by Mussolini and

[22] Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality*, cit. For Mosse, d'Annunzio's "conception of politics was his major contribution to fascism in Italy, and indeed to the advancement of a political style that had grown up during the nineteenth century and that he perfected." The poet was in fact, for Mosse, "as important for understanding the nature of modern politics as any statesman or ruler," pp. 100, 89.
[23] *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., letters 23 (p. 13) and 34 (p. 21).
[24] Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, cit., p. 140.

his Ministries: National Institutes were erected to fund the production of his plays and the publication of his *opera omnia*; his childhood home in Pescara was declared a National Monument; with d'Annunzio's donation to the State of the Vittoriale, its expenses were covered by the Government even as he continued to live there; and Mussolini allocated generous portions of his secret funds to provide for the Vate, who was, after all, a writer (and spendthrift). In short, the Comandante was, to use Mussolini's legendary language, covered in gold.

And yet, things weren't really so simple. The Vate may have acted as John the Baptist, but he was no disciple: neither a member of the fascist party nor particularly thrilled by its *modus operandi* (his lukewarm reception of the group and its *squadrismo* in the early years engendered an enduring diffidence toward him on the part of several hierarchs). Though Mussolini would remember an essential "unità di pensiero" between the two of them, they had several skirmishes over the years, and the toothache Gabriele was at times quite bothersome indeed.[25] Several times, in the face of such disagreements or of any presumed slight (but especially in the twenties), the volatile poet would call into question his friendship with the Capo: address him as his "caro compagno" yet muse that perhaps he didn't deserve it, ask point blank if he could really consider him a friend, declare that the letter being penned would be his last. Each time, the duce responded with a cool head and steady hand, firm but always reassuring, as in 1926 when d'Annunzio accused him of suspicion towards him: "La tua lettera mi ha semplicemente *sbalordito*. […] Ti dichiaro schiettissimamente che io non ho la minima diffidenza verso di te […] che la mia amicizia è leale e fraterna; che la mia fiducia in te è immacolata." [26] And so, through it all – despite it all – the two men maintained something like a friendship, though this was largely epistolary, for they only met face-to-face six times in the course of their twenty-plus year acquaintance.

[25] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani*, cit., p. 580.
[26] *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., pp. 202-03.

On the surface, Mussolini's rise to power, first over the PNF and subsequently over Italy, would seem the most insurmountable challenge to their friendship. After all, the poet had a very keen sense of himself and his importance in fascism's development, as he wrote to the duce in 1923: "Ma, nel movimento detto 'fascista', il meglio non è generato dal mio spirito? La riscossa nazionale di oggi non fu annunziata da me …?"[27] His influence, however, wasn't merely of a philosophical sort, the result of that "unity of thought" Mussolini had described. Rather, for a time the Comandante was a rival to Mussolini: up until the aforementioned congress of 1921, when the duce's leadership of the PNF was anything but a foregone conclusion, many thought that the poet and not the journalist would emerge as chief. The Fortinbras of Predappio, as d'Annunzio called Mussolini,[28] had proven himself a capable politician, but not necessarily a charismatic leader, and so, simply put, if the *arditi* and avant-gardists among the first fascists sought such a new man to lead the way, the poet-soldier – not Fortinbras – was their natural choice.[29] But d'Annunzio made no moves in this direction, even when Mussolini's close collaborators Italo Balbo and Dino Grandi (secretly) and Pietro Marsich (publicly) encouraged him to do so.[30]

The Vate wouldn't disappear from the political scene, but he wouldn't pose a real threat to Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922, either. Having been effectively outmaneuvered by the duce in what De Felice has called "un vero piccolo capolavoro di tattica politica," he did nothing to oppose the March on Rome, in part perhaps because he – like so many others – didn't believe it would result in an enduring government.[31] Despite the uneasy affection and admiration with which d'Annunzio would increasingly address the

[27] *Ivi*, letter 59, p. 38.
[28] *Ivi*, letter 278, p. 192.
[29] See Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, cit., chapter 4; id., *Le origini dell'ideologia*, cit., chapter 4; de Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario,* cit.
[30] De Felice speculates that d'Annunzio, believing so fully in his role as Vate, expected and waited for the "masses" to come to him, rather than actively take steps on his own. As he waited, Mussolini consolidated his own power. See *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., p. xxviii.
[31] *Ivi*, p. xxxi – xxxvii.

dictator over the years, given these beginnings, De Felice suggests, the poet's opinion on him wouldn't have changed all that much: Mussolini would've remained the "*parvenu* che aveva sfruttato e in ultima analisi tradito la sua opera."[32]

And yet, it was Mussolini's appointment as Prime Minister that ended the match and allowed them to shake hands, retreating pacifically to their respective corners. D'Annunzio refuted accusations that he envied Mussolini – envy, never, for that was the capital vice one got zero enjoyment from![33] – but his suffering was evident. Just a few months later, he announced his shattered withdrawal from politics to the duce, with whom he now used the familiar "tu": "Io ho risolto – oggi, 16 dicembre – di ritirarmi nel mio silenzio e di ridarmi intero alla mia arte, che forse mi consolerà. Il meglio di me, offerto alla Patria, in tanti anni di pena volenterosa, oggi è falsato o rinnegato o calpestato. Le testimonianze d'amore e di fede non m'illudono. L'Italia d'oggi non m'ama e non crede in me."[34] It would seem, in fact, that this retreat to respective corners – this division of labor – smoothed the waters between them. This is ironic, of course, for it was their shared vision of a world in which art and politics were fused that drew them together; but it was the re-separation of those elements, Mussolini taking on politics and d'Annunzio opting for the arts, that allowed them not merely to coexist but to behave as friends and allies.[35]

And yet, as noted, they had several conflicts throughout the years. The Matteotti crisis, so pained a moment in fascism's clinching of power, was one of the most delicate for this dynamic duo. Behind the scenes the opposition made advances toward d'Annunzio, urging him to come back into the fray and take on Mussolini, while in the papers it was widely reported that the Comandante had referred to the assassination as a "fetida ruina." Through the police commissioner Giovanni Rizzo, in residence at the Vittoriale, Mussolini

[32] *Ivi*, p. lviii.
[33] Antongini, *D'Annunzio Aneddotico*, cit., p. 76.
[34] *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., letter 53, p. 32.
[35] De Felice, introduction to *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., p. xxxviii.

communicated his displeasure: he was facing such a tough battle, he had hoped that d'Annunzio would've simply stayed out of it – this at the end of July. And in fact the poet made no move. De Felice speculated that he simply wanted to dedicate himself to his art, and yet stressed the significance of timing: in this period, Mussolini followed through on a project that had been underway, the purchase in the government's name of the manuscript of d'Annunzio's play *La Gloria* for the rather impressive sum of 200, 000 *lire*. This was just one of a series of subventions – selling manuscripts was an excellent way for writers to make money – that would reach five million, 250 thousand *lire* by 1927. In August of the Matteotti summer, the *Gloria* deal successfully concluded, Rizzo relayed d'Annunzio's appreciation of this gesture. No further public statements about the crime were made.[36] Was this a classic *quid pro quo*? In any case, it is an impressive testament to the sort of VIP the poet was in 1920s Italy: Mussolini wasn't paying him to stay at home (for he must have had little fear that the Vate would return to the playing field), but merely to keep his mouth shut.

Foreign policy issues of the 1930s would create some friction, too. The poet-soldier's love for France and hatred of Germany – and Hitler – made the regime fear they would need to silence him as Mussolini moved toward an alliance with the Reich. The Poet, aged and rather ill, made a point of meeting the duce at Verona after his visit to Germany in September of 1937; testimonies on the significance of this meeting are diametrically opposed, with one eyewitness claiming that the d'Annunzio sought to dissuade the Capo from tightening relations with the Führer, another that he more than ever expressed his admiration for Mussolini's successes.

Whatever the truth of that encounter, it's not at all inconceivable that it was as ambivalent as the rest of their relationship. Indeed: the more d'Annunzio had grown to

[36] De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista I, cit.*, pp. 681-82; Paolo Alatri, *Gabriele D'Annunzio,* UTET, Torino 1983, p. 525. See also Nino Valeri *D'Annunzio davanti al fascismo*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1963 and Giovanni Rizzo, *D'Annunzio e Mussolini, La verità sui loro rapporti*, Cappelli editore, Bologna 1960, p. 17; On subventions to writers, see Giovanni Sedita, *Gli intellettuali di Mussolini. La cultura finanziata dal fascismo*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2010.

admire the duce's strength and force of will, the more the alliance with Hitler would've pained him. Likewise, for as much as Mussolini was all ears when it came to the Comandante's opinions, an expression of opposition, even if reflected upon, might not have been welcome in a moment that was supposed to be celebratory. At the end of the day, theirs was an association weighed down by the baggage that such illustrious men carry wherever they go. Mussolini knew that it was advisable to keep the prestigious d'Annunzio happy, or at least quiet. He knew that one way to do so was to appease his innumerable requests – to give this or that person a political appointment or some other employment. He knew, when all was said and done, that d'Annunzio was someone to keep an eye on. In his turn, the poet was aware of his own capital, and rarely disdained to spend it. At the same time, he knew that he could be used – that, for instance, a personal, adulatory letter he wrote to the duce would end up as third page news. Finally, he knew that he was being spied on: the aforementioned Commissioner Rizzo was an informant, but d'Annunzio knew it, befriended him, and took advantage of the alternate line to the duce, sometimes venting the feelings he preferred not to express directly, knowing they would however reach the right ears.[37]

It is perhaps for all of these reasons – the rivalry of fascism's early years, the flare-ups, the eternal negotiations, the baggage containing the masks public personae sometimes have to wear – that so many scholars have shrunk from the term "friendship" in regards to the duce and the Vate as they would from a rattlesnake. There is no denying that the bond was tortuous, ambiguous, and full of complex or even contradictory feelings; but it would hardly be the first of which this is true, and there is no reason to doubt the fundamental sincerity of the sentiments expressed by either man. Increasingly convinced that the African colonial expedition was a courageous challenge to the imperialism of England and now America – an

[37] See accounts by Rizzo, *D'Annunzio e Mussolini*, cit.; Vito Salierno, *La censura occulta e palese nei confronti di D'Annunzio. Giovanni Rizzo, l'‹‹occhiuto carceriere›› al Vittoriale e i suoi rapporti segreti a Mussolini*, Rocco Carabba, Lanciano 2011; Roberto Festorazzi, *D'Annunzio e la Piovra fascista. Spionaggio al Vittoriale nella testimonianza del federale di Brescia*, Il Minotauro, Roma 2005.

arrogance d'Annunzio most viscerally deplored – and enthused by the choice to leave the League of Nations, the poet more frequently and euphorically praised Mussolini: "o mio fratello minore e maggiore" as Pascoli had once called him (March 1936), "mio caro e grande compagno, sempre più grande, … tu hai veramente compiuto quel che nella storia dei grandi uomini non è quasi mai compiuto. Tu hai creato il tuo Mito," "Mio Capo e Maestro" (April 1937), "nessuno è stato commosso come me nel profondo da una specie di rivelazione soprannaturale" (this for the League of Nations in December '37).[38]

The duce was characteristically more reserved in his language, and much briefer in his correspondence, but he, too, showed affection and admiration, and a desire for a relationship that was as much of a friendship as it was an alliance. In the wake of the Matteotti crisis, for instance, he once wrote to d'Annunzio regarding political matters, but closed his letter with an appeal, "scrivimi, *non di politica*." A few months earlier, he confided in the poet as he would with few others: "sono piantato come certi dannati danteschi nella politica che è – tutto sommato – miserabile. […] E triste e snervante alla fine." [39] Mussolini spoke freely about the Italian bard, especially in private and especially after his death. He was consistently positive, giving d'Annunzio credit, always, where he thought it was due. To Ludwig, he said that three men were responsible for Italy's intervention in the Great War: trade unionist Filippo Corridoni, himself, and the Vate; his drama *La Nave*, too, had gotten everybody excited about the Navy.[40] He likewise declared that Italy clearly owed Fiume to its Comandante, with a tone indicating that this was simply "pura verità storica che si deve riconoscere."[41] Rizzo, the spy, saw mutual affection and admiration, and observed that "Il Capo del Governo tiene in gran considerazione le opinioni di d'Annunzio e, per ogni atto o

[38] *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., letters Carteggio, letters 537 (p. 560), 555 (p. 369); 557-58 (p. 371-72), l568 (p. 376).
[39] *Ivi*, letters159 (p. 116-17), 156 (p. 114).
[40] Ludwig, *Colloqui*, cit., p. 99.
[41] *Ivi*, p. 103.

deliberazione importante, vuol sapere che cosa ne dice, che cosa ne pensa il Poeta."[42] In effect, the duce's tendency to follow d'Annunzio's advice (often) and even to ask for it (less frequently) gives truth to the claim. Their fondness for one another revealed itself in small details: Mussolini would wish the poet to get over a cold because "colds are stupid," while the poet would lament his own illnesses: "Il fazzoletto di Othello è preferibile a quello del raffreddore"[43] – amusing traces of their virile, heroic vision of the world. In 1937, when Giugliemo Marconi, president of the Royal Academy of Intellectuals, died, Mussolini pressured d'Annunzio to take his place, although the poet had always shunned such an idea; when he finally acquiesced, he did so as "una piena testimonianza della mia devozione" to a friend.[44]

When d'Annunzio was gone, the duce missed him. If his son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano didn't perceive him as being particularly moved as they made the journey from Rome to Gardone for the services – Mussolini stared out the window and rambled on about all the iron, which littered the sides of the road, going to waste – others sources reveal his distress. He had been up most of the night and had nightmares when he did sleep: Rachele had finally gone to bed at two, but Mussolini paced the marbled halls of Villa Torlonia, barefooted, like an ox. At midnight, 12:30, two, five, and six, he called Claretta. It wasn't all for d'Annunzio, truth be told, for that day he had heard gossip that his lover was unfaithful and he was tormented by it; but in the wee hours of the morning, he told her once again how sad he was. "Pensa, siamo stati insieme per 23 anni, abbiamo combattuto le nostre battaglie. In tutte le guerre siamo stati vicini, e quando sono trascorsi tanti anni è triste," he mused: "Lui mi voleva molto bene, e anch'io."[45]

[42] Rizzo, *D'Annunzio e Mussolini*, cit., p. 132.
[43] *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., letter 178, p. 132.
[44] *Ivi*, letter 565, p. 374.
[45] Petacci, *Mussolini segreto*, cit., p. 233.

The next night he wouldn't sleep much either, for the whole day had been terribly trying: the flimsy telephonic connections at the Vittoriale drove him into a tizzy, as he couldn't reach Claretta. The sight of d'Annunzio's body, "so cold, dead, finished," touched him, and he was perturbed by its seemingly careless preparation: you could see a shoe, his mouth was left open, and why do they place the hands on the chest? When his turn came, he'd have all the instructions written out, so she could tell them what he wanted. The funeral was poetic, he told her: Beethoven, the lake, a walk through the poplar trees and olive grove. But sad, and it had been painful to see those poor men who struggled to bear the casket and every so often had to stop and catch their breath.[46] A few days later, Ciano, too, would finally see a duce moved by the Comandante's passing. He spoke of the emptiness he felt now; Gabriele d'Annunzio "ormai significava ben poco; ma era là, quel vecchio ed ogni tanto giungeva un suo messaggio. [Mussolini] ha riconosciuto che aveva rappresentato molto nella sua vita."[47]

*

Did the new poets – "questa Italia versolibera perché incapace di discorsi completi" – think they could go on without d'Annunzio? This was the duce's question, and his vision of a post-Vate world was even a tad apocalyptic: after d'Annunzio, he said, everything would be "prosa da infimo impero."[48] While he judged the poet's novels to be "documenti gravosi dell'ottocento,"[49] as a playwright – as we've seen – he declared him his favorite among the moderns, along with Pirandello and Shaw.[50] He, Mussolini told De Begnac, one of those poets who owed everything to Nietzsche; and, indeed, volumes and volumes have been

[46] *Ivi*, pp. 233-36.
[47] Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario1937-1943*, ed, Renzo De Felice, BUR Rizzoli, Milano 2006 [1980], p. 108.
[48] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani*, cit., p. 583.
[49] Ciano, reporting in his diary a conversation with Mussolini, who had just been informed of d'Annunzio's death, March 1, 1939, *Diario*, cit. p. 106. Regarding the novel *Forse che sì*, however, the duce had told his author was "bellissimo." *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., letter 476, p. 314.
[50] Ludwig, *Colloqui*, cit., p. 203.

written on Nietzschean themes, especially Supermanism, in the poet's *oeuvre*.[51] In that *Gloria* manuscript Mussolini bought for 200,000 *lire* – who knows if this indicates a particular interest in that piece – we in fact see a battle between two Supermanish dictators, with what many have called a "Superfemmina" in the middle.

In the five-act prose tragedy, we meet Ruggero Flamma in a large and naked room supported by stone pillars; on the architraves of the four doors are sculpted a flame design (as the Comandante would later use at Fiume) and the protagonist's motto, "Vim ex vi" (Strength from strength). Upstage, a balcony overlooks the piazza where much of the play's important – offstage – movement takes place. Flamma and his devoted followers pledge to combat Rome's decrepit dictator, Cesare Bronte, "Ciascuno secondo le sue forze, e oltre."[52] They are aided by Bronte's wife, who is mesmerized by Flamma when she hears him speak and offers him her help and her very self. Elena Comnèna, who declares that "la Gloria mi somiglia" is d'Annunzio's Helen of Troy; as noted in a "concordanza" preceding the play text, the Greek heroine "somigli[a] in sua bellezza alle iddie immortali."[53] La Comnèna is a sort of Lady Macbeth, too: poisoning her already infirm husband, she spurs Flamma on both before and after he rises to the top, but her power over him, described by one of his men as a possession,[54] eventually leads him to his demise. The thirst for glory – personified in the "superfemmina" – of a man too weak to handle it is the tragedy of the play. As Giovanni Pozza wrote in his review of the 1912 reprisal, the piece is the "tragedia simbolica delle anime di vincitori e di dominatori che giunti al punto culminante della loro ascensione sono colti da quella vertigine e travolti da quella ebbrezza che si chiama la Gloria."[55] In the final

[51] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani,* cit., p. 583.
[52] The line is spoken by one of Flamma's followers, Marco Agrate. *La Gloria*, I.iv, p. 369 in Gabriele d'Annunzio, *Tragedie, Sogni e misteri,* Mondadori, Milano 1945 [1939].
[53] *Ivi*, V.i, p. 458, But d'Annunzio also places the quote as an exergue at the beginning of the text; it thus follows immediately upon the "concordanza" relating to Helen of Troy.
[54] *Ivi*, I.iii, p. 364.
[55] From il *Corriere della Sera*, 28 maggio 1912, in *"Arrestate L'Autore"; D'Annunzio in Scena*, ed. Laura Granatella, Bulzoni, Roma 1993, p 271.

act when Flamma can no longer find the strength to dominate – or even face – the crowd who now rebels against him, upon his request Elena stabs him to death. The play ends with her brandishing the bloody dagger on the balcony, the mass below calling for the tyrant's head. In the end, it is La Comnèna, and not Ruggero Flamma, who manages to act "according to his strength and beyond" – just as a Superman would.

Even if it's possible that Mussolini purchased the manuscript of *La Gloria* just to send money d'Annunzio's way, he had evidently given it enough attention to be able to transform one of la Comnèna's memorable lines into his own: her "Chi s'arresta è perduto" became his celebrated "Chi si ferma è perduto," delivered at Genova, on March 14, 1938.[56] (But of course this recalls Machiavelli and Goethe's *attimo fuggente,* too.) Though not one of d'Annunzio's best plays, there are nonetheless several reasons it would've interested the duce, especially in the moment of the Matteotti crisis, having come just a few months after he had told d'Annunzio that power was no pleasure – it was "un tormento e una schiavitù. Col passare dei mesi – oramai 12 – io mi accorgo di diventare sempre più chiuso, lontano, spigoloso. Non mi rammollisco: mi indurisco. Anche perché invece di creare, debbo *liquidare* la mala eredità che mu fu lasciato…"[57] In a transition moment similar to Ruggero Flamma's, the duce found himself coming up against his own limits.

What's more, while Flamma and Bronte were not the Caesars, Coriolanuses, or Napoleons of history that so awed the duce, certainly it's easy to see in him the "intimo dissidio del suo carattere" that Mussolini had identified in Napoleon;[58] likewise, both characters were thought to be fictionalized versions of recent historical figures closer to home – Felice Cavallotti and Francesco Crispi – and such topics in theatre and film most interested

[56] One wonders if this is d'Annunzio overturning Aeschylus' line, spoken by the chorus in *The Libation Bearers*: "Who acts, shall endure" – a play which, as we'll see further on, inspired *La fiaccola sotto il moggio*.
[57] *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini*, cit., letter 139, p. 102.
[58] Ludwig, *Colloqui*, cit., p. 74.

the duce.[59] Finally, great fan of Schiller that he was, the duce wouldn't have missed some familiar motifs: here, as in *Wilhelm Tell*, there was the bellicose woman who spurs a faltering man on (to action or to death, as the case may be). Flamma looks at Elena with a sort of admiring fear: "tu sei implacabile, tu non dài tregua. Tu vai innanzi a tutte le cose ignote e terribile come se fossero familiari.[60] (We could even think d'Annunzio had *Tell* in mind when he put into Elena's mouth the words, "Io sono la freccia pel tuo arco. Mandami al segno."[61]) One scholar has offered a convincing reading of the play as paralleling Schiller's *The Robbers,* noting Flamma and Bronte's striking resemblance to rival brothers Karl and Franz, where the antagonist, Franz, is the hero's double.[62]

Still, something more substantial links this play to the two by d'Annunzio we know that Mussolini particularly admired: *La figlia di Jorio* and *La fiaccola sotto il moggio.*[63] Ironically enough, in those two plays, Superman themes are unimportant if not nonexistent, but each of the three (like nearly all of the poet's texts) is a tragedy, as, for d'Annunzio, tragedies were the way to a new, non-bourgeois, Italian theatre (and, consequently, a new, non-bourgeois Italy). It was Mussolini who affirmed that the dramatist can prepare the way for the Statesman and the revolution – "il poeta è quasi sempre la profeta della nuova èra" – but it could've just as easily been d'Annunzio. The Vate's entire theatrical project was an attempt at a national and theatrical palingenesis inspired by *The Birth of Tragedy*, Wagner's notion of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, and the popular theatre of Romain Rolland, whom d'Annunzio had met and established a relationship with in 1897.[64]

[59] Rachele Mussolini, *The Real Mussolini*, cit., p. 38.
[60] *La Gloria*, cit. III..iv, p. 423.
[61] *Ivi*, III.iv, p. 423.
[62] Umberto Artioli, *Il combattimento invisibile. D'Annunzio tra romanzo e teatro.* Laterza, Roma 1995, pp. 124-26.
[63] Ludwig, *Colloqui*, cit., p. 203.
[64] On their relationship, see Annamaria Andreoli, *Il Vivere Inimitabile. Vita di Gabriele D'Annunzio*, Mondadori, Milano 2000.

"Arte e politica non furono mai disgiunte nel mio pensiero,"[65] the poet declared, and drama was a particularly efficacious form, from a political point of view, because it worked on the crowd the same way a politician-orator might. Significantly enough, d'Annunzio's theatrical and political activities began practically contemporaneously, as he published his first tragedy, *La città morta* (*The Dead City*) in 1896 and entered Parliament in 1897. At the same time, he disdained parliamentary democracy – he wouldn't last long as a representative – and in his own writing on Nietzsche, dating back to 1892, he had already suggested that it would take a Superman, an aristocrat wouldn't dirty his hands in a ballot box, to change things.[66] It goes without saying that as Comandante at Fiume, d'Annunzio would seek to put this new theatricalized political mode into play.

Years earlier, though, *La Gloria*'s hero tried to do so as well – and failed. D'Annunzio wrote the play so that the two supermen never meet on stage, thus allowing himself to invite famed tragedian Ermete Zacconi to play both parts, "secondo facevano gli antichi attori tragici al tempo di Eschilo,"[67] and even die twice; but the clash between the two characters is described by the others, and we are told of Bronte's words to his younger rival:

> Io mi coricherei anzi tempo silenziosamente nella folla che voi mi aprite, se vedessi tra voi un vero uomo, atto alla gran bisogna, un vasto e libero cuore umano, un figlio della terra, radicato nella profondità del nostro suole. Ma l'ora non è giunta. L'uomo nuovo non è ancora nato. […] Non veggo in fondo ai vostri occhi un gran destino, ma la vertigine.[68]

This, of course, turns out to be true: Flamma lacks the strength and the will to liberate the young national(ist) soul, "sollevare la sua Potenza represa, allargare il suo respiro, restituirla al suo genio," to use Bronte's words again.[69]

---

[65] From an interview in *La Tribuna*, June 20, 1902. In Paolo Alatri, ed. *Scritti politici di Gabriele D'Annunzio*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1980, p. 11.
[66] "La bestia elettiva," in Gabriele d'Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici* II, ed. Annamaria Andreoli and G. Zanetti, Mondadori, Milano 2003, p. 94.
[67] Cited in Valentina Valentini, *Il poema visibile. Le prime messe in scena delle tragedie di Gabriele D'Annunzio*, Bulzoni, Roma 1993, p. 254.
[68] *La Gloria,* cit., I.ii, p. 357.
[69] *Ivi,* I.ii, p. 356.

Flamma's inability to surpass himself is a result of his difficulty in managing the crowd; this character trait becomes a thematic crux of the play – namely, the necessity of ritual in working on the increasingly politicized masses.[70] The crowd's power over the man who should have been able to dominate it is explained by one of his followers, Sigismondo Leoni: Flamma has a "orrore fisico" of the crowd; for him it is monstrous, and the only way he manages to dominate both himself and that mass is to stand high above them – on a balcony, for instance – where he can breathe freely.[71] When Flamma begs Elena to kill him, it is because he hasn't been able to overcome this horror, "sotto la minaccia dello strazio ignobile, del supplizio basso, dell'insulto plebeo […] Io so il fiato della belva, il suo lezzo, l'atrocità del suo contatto."[72]

In *La Gloria*, as in other plays, d'Annunzio masterfully exploited an aural presence, turning the off-stage crowd into an active character: from the very start, even if we do not see the Roman masses, we hear them, as do the characters who look down from the balcony into the piazza and report on what they see. The mass' rumor comes in waves, increasing the tension and punctuating the action, finally instigating it as the plays reaches its bloody conclusion.[73] Elena brandishes the blade, and the rabid cries for the tyrant's head remind us that Flamma's inability to shape that mass – to enchant it with his speech – was the cause of both his failure and his death. His inability to perform the ritual of modern politics, in other words, finishes him.

In his quest to create a new kind of theatre – especially a new kind of tragedy – the Vate sought to close the gap between political and theatrical ritual: if politics and art were never separate in his mind, it was also true that he would attempt to bring the theatre fully inside the political realm (it's in this regard not surprising that Ruggero Flamma, as Simona

[70] Simona Costa, *D'Annunzio*. Salerno Editrice, Roma 2012, p. 157.
[71] *La Gloria,* cit., I.iii, p. 359-60.
[72] *La Gloria,* cit., V.i, p. 454-55.
[73] Valentini, *Il poema visibile*, cit., p. 358.

Costa notes, encourages the artists among his men to support his political action with their work).[74] In an aptly named *Rebirth of Tragedy* written in 1897, just two years before the new parliamentarian would write *La Gloria*, d'Annunzio celebrated the inauguration at Orange, France of the ancient Roman theatre as a reawakening of the Latin spirit and – implicitly – a rejection of the bourgeois theatrical model that closed its spectators into a room. In this transformation, and in this taking of theatre into the open air, there was a transformation of the character, and function, of theatre itself. It would be a triumph for dramatic poets, who, recapturing the religiosity of the Dionysiac ritual, could once again raise their form to the heights of a "primitive dignity," for drama was the only form with which

> i poeti possano manifestarsi alla folla e darle la rivelazione della Bellezza, comunicarle i sogni virili ed eroici che trasfigurano subitamente la vita. […] Il drama [sic] non può essere se non un rito o un messaggio. La persona vivente in cui s'incarna su la scena il verbo d'un Rivelatore, la presenza della moltitudine muta come nei templi non dànno forse anche oggi alla rappresentazione della tragedia sofoclea nel teatro antico di Orange il carattere di un culto, di una cerimonia, di un mistero?[75]

Precisely because the drama was an aesthetic and transformative experience, not simply a rational communication, it had to take on the character of a rite. It was, moreover, through the "verbal enchantment" of the rite that the crowd would be united.[76]

The Vate would further theorize his vision in the 1900 novel *Il Fuoco* (translated as *The Flame of Life* rather than a more literal "The Fire"), where the poet's alter-ego and protagonist Stelio Effrena – dubbed the "Imaginifico," as Mussolini would then call the poet – discovers the power he holds over the crowd as an orator even as he theorizes tragedy's rebirth. In Effrena's view, as Mary Ann Frese Witt points out, military and poetic action are each "a form of conquest enabled by the energy of passion": the slippage between poet and

[74] Costa, *D'Annunzio*, cit., p. 157.
[75] "La rinascenza della tragedia," in *La Tribuna*, 2 August 1897. In d'Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici* II, cit., p. 265.
[76] Mary Ann Frese Witt, *The Search for Modern Tragedy: Aesthetic Fascism in Italy and France*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2001, p. 38. Witt dedicates nearly sixty pages to "d'Annunzio's Nietzschean Tragedy."

political operator is complete, as Effrena himself observed: "*La parola del poeta comunicata alla folla* era dunque un atto, come il gesto dell'eroe."[77]

As d'Annunzio's characterization of the audience calling for clean air – to be let out of the closed room of the theatre that had become "un'industria ignobile nelle mani di fabricatori destituiti d'ogni intelligenza e d'ogni cultura" – highlights, his project was also, fundamentally, an attempt to give birth to a non-bourgeois theatre. This fact implicitly and intrinsically links his vision to Mussolini's, and the prominence that the poet's plays would earn on fascist stages undoubtedly had to do with this philosophical–political consonance. As I'll address in more detail in chapter three, the men of the theatre who play an important role in the Mussolini, Man of the theatre story all clamored for a revolution of the Italian stage, which had long been dominated by French bourgeois dramas and mediocre imitations of them. Critic Silvio d'Amico, who respected d'Annunzio but was far from one of his biggest fans, had recognized the poet's success on this front as one of his chief merits: "Scrivere come si parla, riprodurre al centimetro le cose, ostinarsi a trovar la tragedia nel 'salotto buono' o nei tinelli piccolo-borghesi: chi fu il primo a rivoltarsi contro tutto ciò e ad annunciare a grandi squilli il ritorno della Poesia sulla Scena? Nemmeno a dirlo, Gabriele D'Annunzio."[78] D'Annunzio's project appealed to professionals on these grounds: when he finally succeeded in writing good plays, first with *Francesca da Rimini* and then with *La figlia di Jorio*, he was lauded for his evident goal, to "dotare l'Italia di un teatro nuovo ed innovatore, attingendo l'ispirazione, i personaggi, i caratteri, il linguaggio, alle nostre storie, alle nostre leggende, alle nostre tradizioni, all'arte nosta."[79] The recourse to ancient myth and its heroic figures entailed recapturing a Mediterranean tradition, and an elevated, heroic one at that – far from the mundane trifles of the characters populating the French salon dramas that were so popular in the bourgeois theatres.

[77] d'Annunzio, *Il fuoco*, ed. Anco Marzio Mutterle, Mondadori, Milano 1990, pp. 95-96.
[78] Silvio d'Amico, *Storia del teatro drammatico.* Vol. 2, abridged version, Bulzoni, Roma 1982 [1960], p. 314.
[79] *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 6 March 1904, in *"Arrestate L'Autore,"*cit., p. 433.

In this respect, the label of "bourgeois tragedy" attached to *La fiaccola sotto il moggio* (*The Torch Under the Bushel*) when it premiered in 1905 is wholly inadequate.[80] In the story of a young woman who seeks revenge on the servant who killed her mother to then marry her father, we find the absolute destruction of the De Sangro family, which represents not just the sad story of a single family, but the "disfacimento di tutta una casta,"[81] or of "la razza che si spegne,"[82] as reviewers claimed. The utter annihilation of the bourgeoisie, in other words. And of the type of theatre concerned with its existence.

D'Annunzio raised the play to such heights, first, by drawing explicit parallels to the House of Atreus. He envisioned his protagonist as a modern Electra, in fact including an exergue attributed to her (but in reality belonging to the Chorus of *The Libation Bearers*): "You must be hard, give no ground, to win home."[83] This Electra is named Gigliola, and the torch under the bushel is the rage of her revenge, which she hopes to enact on the ex-servant now step-mother Angizia. Her plans are thwarted by her father, Tibaldo, who takes it upon himself to kill his new wife so as to keep his daughter's hands clean of any damned spots. The finale shows daughter and father collapsing and dying on stage, she of her own volition, having thrust her hand into a bag of vipers in an attempt to achieve a murder-suicide.

What's most poetic, and theatrical, about the play is its atmosphere. The old aristocracy's collapse is mimicked by that of their house, which crumbles before their eyes: the fountain runs dry, walls and pillars crack, "il tutto è vetusto, consunto, corroso, fenduto, coperto di polvere, condannato a perire."[84] It's not the individual behavior of the characters that bring about the tragedy, in other words, but the decadence and instability of the very

[80] *Il giornale d'Italia*, 29 March 1905, in *"Arrestate L'Autore,"*cit., p. 555.
[81] *La tribuna*, 29 March 1905, in *"Arrestate L'Autore,"*cit., p. 553.
[82] Domenico Oliva, in *ll giornale d'Italia*, 26 March 1905, in *"Arrestate L'Autore,"*cit., p. 566.
[83] Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, in *Aeschylus I*, ed. David Grene and Richard Lattimore (Chicago UP, Chicago 1953), p. 109 l. 455. The Italian translation by Monica Centanni is more to the point, and geared toward a more political reading: "è necessario una forza inflessibile per scendere in campo." (Eschilo, *Le Tragedie* [Mondadori, Milano 2007], p. 547.)
[84] d'Annunzio, *La fiaccola sotto il moggio*,in *Tragedie, Sogni e misteri*, cit., I.i, p. 938.

structure of their lives. "Il *leitmotiv* dell'opera è quello della casa gentilizia che sta crollando," Valentina Valentini notes: "La casa in rovina è la figura drammatica centrale dell'opera, non è soltanto un elemento scenografico: la casa muore, le carte hanno l'odore di morte, le sue stanze danno ricovero ai mali, perpetrano delitti, nascondono assassini."[85] For d'Amico, in fact, among the Vate's plays this was the closest to real life, but what was fascinating about the piece was its desolate atmosphere.[86] Put another way, it wasn't even the characters or their plight that moved, but the tragic frame – of a grander time and bigger place – fitted around them.

At the same time, unsatisfying about *La fiaccola sotto il moggio* for many was the lack of a cathartic ending; from my point of view, however, this element, rather than a dramaturgical shortcoming, ought to be considered the key to the play. The complaint refers not so much to the multiple deaths (even Gigliola's sickly brother Simonetto dies), which were reminiscent of the great tragedies and make the play the story of the "race extinguished," but above all to Gigliola's futile death. Because she is deprived of her chance to kill her mother's murderer, neither she nor the audience get the relief of purgation. She has sacrificed herself to nothing – her heroic gesture is essentially worthless, and her own death without redemption.[87] Crucially, Tibaldo's intervention takes from her the right to the ritual act that would have purified.[88]

The failure of the ritual act – perhaps the reason some considered the play not to have stepped beyond the bounds of bourgeois pseudo-tragedy? – has been read by some scholars as a shift away from the Superman themes that so interested the poet-soldier.[89] And yet, what's most fascinating about even the Superman stories, especially in terms of their appeal

[85] Valentini, *Il poema visibile,*cit. p. 357.
[86] d'Amico, *Storia del teatro drammatico* II, cit., p. 321.
[87] Costa, *D'Annunzio*, cit., p. 175.
[88] Ettore Paratore, *Nuovi studi dannunziani,* Ediars, Pescara 1991, p. 108.
[89] Valentini, for instance, remarks that "da questo momento in poi, la drammaturgia dannunziana si incupice, esprime una vision del mondo "notturna", una crudeltà che non è più quella dell'atto puro del superuomo, ma del delitto senza purificazione," *Il poema visibile*, cit., p. 362.

to the duce, is that victory wasn't a requirement: quite the opposite, if we think of *La Gloria* as an example. On this point Frese Witt notes that "the victory is indeed mutilated," even more so than in the two plays their author referred to as "les victoires mutilées" (*The Dead City* and *The Gioconda*).[90]

That the concept of the "mutilated victory" was quite spendable in fascist eyes is clear, but in regards to the duce's personal tastes, too, this isn't a negligible point; the dictator was fascinated with the fight, even if it ended in loss, according to a fascist ethos that valorized struggle and the choice to act for their own sake. Mussolini talked about this with Ludwig, who commented that d'Annunzio had confessed to have taken on Fiume for the love of action; when Mussolini responded that politics was a means, not an end, Ludwig then asked if the duce would therefore renege on what he once had said: that "Il premio per noi sta nella lotta, anche senza vittoria." On the contrary, Mussolini told him – such a notion was at the core of fascist ideology: "Noi siamo contro la vita comoda!"[91] (This attitude was at the root of the duce's hatred for the bourgeoisie.)

It's not only in the Dannunzian dramas discussed here, but also in the Greek tragedy Mussolini was so enthusiastic about, that victory is often mutilated: in fact, if there's one dominant aspect of Greek tragedy, it is the battle against an inexorable fate that simply can't be won. Mussolini had declared that he liked the d'Annunzio of this play and of *La figlia di Jorio* (another masterpiece of ritual). D'Amico, too, said that *La fiaccola* was second best only to *Jorio*. Other critics appreciated the play with more reserve, but the public had a still harder time with it. Mussolini's preference for it is noteworthy in this regard: his tastes were aligned more closely to that of the critics than of the public, which might reveal in addition to a fascination for the themes outlined here, a more sophisticated – and literary – taste than the

[90] Witt, *The Search for Modern Tragedy*, cit., p. 77.
[91] Ludwig, *Colloqui*, cit., p. 189.

bourgeois theatregoers of his day.[92] And less of a need for *catharsis*: the ability to accept that battle cannot yet be won?

For a Mussolini who relished in the struggle as much as in the victory, that d'Annunzio's tragedies in the end were a "dialectic of striving and suffering" may have been exactly what made them appealing. The plays ultimately mused that "the time for heroic 'victory' is not yet ripe" [93] – just like Nietzsche's writing, and just like the duce's analyses of the German thinker. D'Annunzio, too, explored what Mussolini had called "questo periodo angoscioso e tragico di crisi che attraversa la coscienza europea," and even if his Supermen didn't win – or perhaps better, if his characters failed to become Supermen – that was alright, for the same duce who for so long lamented his inability to create, forced still to *liquidate* the old, would have seen in the Vate's plays familiar troubles. It wasn't in drama that the Superman would be found: it was in the duce himself. (We need not take at face value that Mussolini *really* would have accepted struggle without victory – on the theatrical stage, that was the stuff drama was made of. The political stage was something else.)

Pirandello fa in sostanza – senza volerlo – del teatro fascista: il mondo è come vogliamo che sia, è la nostra creazione.

– Mussolini

Just ten days before Mussolini and the blackshirts marched on Rome, Luigi Pirandello conquered the capital city for himself, with his play *Enrico IV*. The victory was particularly sweet, as his masterpiece, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, hadn't fared so well when it premiered in Rome the year before. (A fight famously broke out in the house: among the

[92] Valentina Valentini argues that the play was essentially rejected by the public for its "modernity," a problem tied explicitly to the fact that the theatergoing public was not as advanced as the literary crowd. An aspect of its modernity, she notes, was its nihilistic vision and cruel depiction of the family – depictions diametrically opposed to those that standard bourgeois theatrical fare tended to contain. *Il poema visibile*, cit., p. 362
Rachele's testimony that Mussolini loved comedies and vaudeville, as well as history, show a sort of divide in his tastes; he enjoyed the high and the low, and despised everything bourgeois in between.
[93] Witt, *The Search for Modern Tragedy*, cit., p. 49.

defenders of the play that would quickly become one of the foundational texts of the twentieth-century theatrical revolution was the duce's future son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano.)[94] With these two plays, the Sicilian dramatist most magisterially explored the theme that was an obsession for him: the abyss between an individual's self-perception and how the rest of the world sees him or her. Alongside and overlapping was the question of the power of art – of performance – to resolve such conflicts in perception and, indeed, to create a new reality. In *Sei personaggi*, these troubled creatures come looking for someone who can complete the story their author left unfinished: when a theatrical director takes them on, they have their doubts that the actors will show them as they "really" are – as they each imagine themselves to be. The man called Enrico IV, on the other hand, takes refuge from the pain of lost love in a performance of madness, pretending to believe he is that historical personage after having actually believed so for twelve years (thanks to a fall, from a horse, while masquerading as the same). Unable to live the life he desires, he opts to live in a fictional world where he pretends to think he is the king and everyone else pretends he is, too.

The victorious Roman debut of *Enrico IV*, which had first graced the boards in Milan in February, allowed philosopher-critic Adriano Tilgher to cinch the interpretation of Pirandello he had been circling around: "Dualismo di Vita e Forma: necessità per la Vita di darsi forma e impossibilità di esaurirsi in essa, donde un tragico contrasto."[95] While for Tilgher and many others – as we'll see further on – this meant that Pirandello was a philosophizer and a pessimistic one at that, the author counter-argued that the coexistence of competing truths implied "l'affermazione del continuo procedere e fluire della vita."[96] The duce agreed with him, coming around to proclaim in 1932 that, "Pirandello fa in sostanza –

[94] Jennifer Lorch, *Pirandello. Six Characters in Search of an Author (Plays in Production)*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2005, p. 4.
[95] Adriano Tilgher, *Il problema centrale. Cronache teatrali 1914-1926*, Edizione del Teatro Stabile, Genova 1973, p. 236.
[96] Interview with Pietro Lissia, in *L'Impero*, January 26, 1933, in *Interviste a Pirandello, "Parole da dire, uomo, agli altri uomini,"* ed. Ivano Pupo, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2002, pp. 507.

senza volerlo – del teatro fascista: il mondo è come vogliamo che sia, è la nostra creazione."[97]

It was presumably this unwitting fascism, just as much as the rapidly budding international fame of the genius behind it, that prompted Mussolini to go knocking on the writer's door, playing Mephistopheles to his Faust: just over a year after *Enrico IV*'s Roman success – and just days shy of the first anniversary of the March on Rome – the duce summoned the playwright, whom he had never met, to his office. He showed great interest in the Maestro's plays and activities, wished him success for his upcoming trip to New York, where a special Pirandello season had been planned, and asked him about the fortune his works had found elsewhere abroad. He even shared his opinion on the works he had most recently been to the theatre to see: he liked *Sei personaggi* (which recovered swiftly from its first Roman outing, garnering acclaim both within and beyond Italy's borders) and *Enrico IV* best; he thought the idea behind *La vita che ti diedi*, a show that had opened just two weeks earlier, was powerful; and he admitted quite frankly that he didn't like *Vestire gli ignudi* much at all.[98] Before the meeting ended, the Capo del governo invited Pirandello to visit him again, to let him know how the New York trip had gone. The timing of their visit was anything but coincidental: it functioned as a prince's summoning of a courtier-ambassador, providing instructions, however tacit, on how to behave abroad.[99] Thus the relationship – the collaboration – between the duce and the dramatist began.

Pirandello had previously expressed admiration for the duce, but it was here that Mephistopheles evidently won Faust over. While back in December of '22 the author had wondered if fascism didn't contain an "aestheticism" that rendered it incapable of being a

[97] Ludwig, *Colloqui*, cit. 203.
[98] Orio Vergani interviewed Pirandello, who relayed all the duce had said, in *L'Idea Nazionale*, 23 October, 1923, in *Interviste a* Pirandello, cit., p. 205-07.
[99] Elio Providenti notes that with Pirandello Mussolini began his politics of showing attention to the intellectuals who went abroad, attempting to influence their behavior and essentially "use" them as more or less aware instruments of propaganda. *Pirandello impolitico. Tra radicalismo e fascismo*, Salerno, Roma 2000, p. 120.

"ricostruttore e realizzatore," now he declared himself "come pochi in grado di comprendere la bellezza di questa continua creazione di realtà che Mussolini compie: una realtà italiana e fascista che non subisce la realtà altrui. Mussolini sa, come pochi, che la realtà sta soltanto in potere dell'uomo di costruirla, e che la si crea soltanto con l'attività dello spirito."[100] The feeling was mutual, in other words; Pirandello saw in Mussolini a hero not unlike his own characters, and the duce recognized in the Maestro's stories his own Nietzschean quest to impose his will in the creation of a new reality – a new Italy.[101] If both men would pass the next decade changing their minds on what each thought of the other, it's clear that there was a particular understanding between them, and at this early stage both were curious about what the other had to offer.

And so, it wouldn't be long before Mephistopheles would come knocking again, and Faust would sign on the dotted line. The signature would come in the form of an open letter, asking for admission to the PNF, just when Mussolini needed help most: in the fall of 1924, in the midst of the Matteotti crisis (d'Annunzio, it turns out, wasn't the only illustrious one that the duce courted in those days). On September 17, Pirandello requested his party card in a telegram; two days later, the text of that message was published in the fascist newspaper *L'Impero*: in it, the author wrote that he felt it was the right moment to publicly declare the loyalty he privately felt, and that he would be honored to become the duce's most "umile e obbediente gregario."[102] The telegram produced no small clamor, delighting Mussolini and dismaying his opponents. For the ardent fascist Telesio Interlandi, the act was a response to a vicious attempt, "in parte riuscito, di ridurre il Fascismo da fenomeno storico a fenomeno di

[100] Interview 16-17 December 1922, in *Interviste a Pirandello*, cit., 205-07.
[101] Tilgher had in fact made the connection between fascism and Pirandello explicit when he wrote, "Il *Fascismo* non è che l'assoluto attivismo trapiantato nel terreno della politica. Questo punto di vista – nuova prova dell'unità di ciascun Cultura – trova sua espressione attuale nell'arte di Luigi Pirandello, il poeta ancora in parte inespresso ma possente e geniale del relativismo assoluto." Cited in Providenti, *Impolitico*, cit., p. 117.
[102] Telegram text cited in Pirandello, *Saggi e interventi*, ed. Ferdinando Taviani, Mondadori, Milano 2006, p. 1249. See also *Interviste a Pirandello*, cit., p. 27; and Gaspare Giudice, *Pirandello. A Biography*, trans. Alastair Hamilton, Oxford UP, London 1975, p. 150.

malavita politica." Echoing Pirandello's earlier statements, he proclaimed the playwright "lo spirito più adatto ad intendere ed amare l'essenza artistica del Fascismo" – reiterating that sense of the duce as the great political craftsman shaping Italy's new reality.[103] For Giovanni Amendola, a democratic liberal who would eventually pay for his opposition to fascism with his life, the whole thing made Pirandello "un uomo volgare." He claimed that the dramatist presented himself as a gung-ho blackshirt because he was embarrassed to not be on the list of nominated senators that had just appeared. He said Pirandello had spent twenty years in search of fame – like his characters, in search of an author. In Mussolini, he had finally found him.[104]

What Amendola didn't know is that Pirandello's gesture had been agreed upon behind close doors with Mussolini's men, and it had all begun with a gentle forcing of the playwright's hand. Hearing that Sem Benelli (the playwright who was Rachele's introduction to the theatre) had formed the "Lega Italica" in opposition to Mussolini, Pirandello – who neither admired Benelli's writing nor his new political stance – had quipped, "Verrebbe quasi voglia di inscriversi al fascismo." The comment reached the duce's office, and a few days later Pirandello received a call: the Capo had heard that he wanted to join the PNF, would he please do so right away? Pirandello balked, fearing it would seem a maneuver to get a seat in the Senate. Assured that he wasn't even on the list of nominees and that the news of his Party membership wouldn't be published before the list was, the playwright granted Mussolini's request.[105]

If the duce's purchase of d'Annunzio's manuscript was one *quid pro quo*, where he gave in order to get, this event emerges in theatre history and Pirandello criticism as another, where the terms were more or less reversed. Smack in the middle of all these goings-on, Pirandello had requested an audience with Mussolini, to ask him for money for his new

[103] Pirandello, *Saggi e interventi*, pp. 1250-51.
[104] Pirandello, *Saggi e interventi*, p. 1255.
[105] Giudice, Pirandello, cit., p. 150; Providenti, *Pirandello impolitico*, cit.; Pupo, Interviste, cit., p. 275.

theatrical enterprise, The Teatro d'Arte (otherwise known as the Teatro degli Unidici, or theatre of the eleven, after its original joint-stock founders). Pirandello's decision to join the PNF, therefore, has been largely written off as opportunism for art's sake: he played the role of the good fascist just to get the Capo's money. In turn, Mussolini gave the Undici his backing as a direct result of the clamorous requesting of the party card.[106] On one level, this is true: when Pirandello and cohort visited the duce, he took cash from his own wallet and handed it to the thespians, rendering explicit the sense of payment made for services rendered. But of course, just as the duce and the Vate's friendship was more complicated than a single incident illustrates, so too was the Mussolini-Pirandello rapport. The Teatro d'Arte moment – which lasted from 1924 until the enterprise folded in 1928 – was a key one, but nevertheless just one of many in a relation that endured until the playwright's death in 1936.

The association was somewhat stormy. Both men had a lot to gain from it, but both also had – in the words Mussolini used for Pirandello – a "brutto carattere": Pirandello had difficulty submitting to authority, but Mussolini expected the humble obedience he had promised. As we'll see in later chapters, the dramatist hoped that the government would fund a National Theatre much like the Comédie Française and place him at its helm. His attitude toward the duce shifted with the vicissitudes of what seemed to be happening with this project and, more generally, with his sense of whether he was receiving all he deserved.[107] The playwright's hopes – given his generally positive disposition toward the duce and fascism – were reason enough to remain on good terms, no matter what tensions mounted.

[106] See, for example, Luigi and Stefano Pirandello, *Nel tempo della lontananza* (1919-1936), ed. Sarah Zappulla Muscarà, Salvatore Sciascia editore, Caltanisetta-Roma 2008, p. 79. As Corrado Alvaro recounted it, the call asking Pirandello to join the Party had come after Pirandello's request. Alvaro was then an anti-fascist, but a member of the dramatist' cohort and originally a founding member of the Teatro who would leave the group when asked to keep references to politics out of his writings. He would intervene in the "Vulgar Man" debates, leaking the behind-the-scenes story told here and arguing that Pirandello's gesture wasn't, as Interlandi had touted, a testament to his fascist faith but rather a response both to the Benelli operation and to the regime's "maneggi e manovre" to win Pirandello's support. Such moves surely included the duce's three-year backing for the new project, which will take partial focus of the next chapter.

[107] Providenti observes that, indeed, Pirandello's attitude toward Mussolini mirrored the one he had held toward his own father: first viewed as a great benefactor, once he fell upon financial ruin Pirandello accused him of being his destruction.

For Mussolini, a more prestigious ally than Pirandello – along with George Bernard Shaw, he was widely considered the world's great living dramatist – would've been hard to come by; and so, he, too, worked to keep the relationship afloat.

Mussolini and Pirandello's collaboration in the founding of the Teatro degli Undici will be discussed in detail in chapter three; but for now what's important to underscore about it is the mutual awareness that Pirandello had clout. He was happy to spend his name for the duce and his regime, and had no doubts that his prestige could bring more of the same to them. Accordingly, when requesting funds, he told the Capo that he would travel abroad with the company and give talks about him and the new Italy (which the playwright in fact often did during show intermissions). He attempted to draw some boundaries: he had no intention of writing "fascist" plays, but he – as Luigi Pirandello – could get up on stage and vouch for Benito Mussolini. The Maestro's recognition of his own prominence ("[a] New York non si parla che di me, e l'Italia ha solo due nomi: Mussolini e Pirandello," he wrote to his son Stefano in 1924[108]) meant that it wasn't always easy to uphold his end of the bargain, which required recognizing the duce as an authority, a superior. This we see most clearly in two letters he wrote to his young love, actress Marta Abba, when he learned from her that the Capo del governo had told her that he was a genius but had a "brutto carattere" (because he had criticized d'Annunzio's poetry during a commemoration of Verga). In the first letter, the Maestro lamented that he, Pirandello, was to "levare in alto suo mito" while he, Mussolini, could go around talking about his "brutto carattere." In the second, he described the duce as "ruvida e grossolana stoffa umana, fatta per comandare con disprezzo gente mediocre e volgare, capace di tutto e incapace di scrupoli. Non può vedersi attorno gente d'altra stoffa. Chi ha scrupoli, chi non soggiace, chi ha il coraggio di dire una verità a fronte alta, ha 'brutto

[108] Pirandello, *Nel tempo della lontananza*, cit., p 76.

carattere.'" Nonetheless, he went on, such a man was necessary at such a time, and so was faithful service to him.[109]

But Pirandello's definition of faithful service didn't always match that of the regime, as we see in a 1927 incident, when Pirandello and company traveled to Argentina. They met with tremendous hostility from the anti-fascist press, who insulted Pirandello (he was washed up), his company (they were dogs), and the entire mission: funded by the State, it was nothing more than a propaganda excursion. The dramatist called for a retraction, going so far as to protest that he wasn't there as a representative of any government or as a member of any party – the expedition was purely artistic. This was typical. Though he was quick to call his art "fascist" and himself a fascist artist, Pirandello nonetheless stressed the non-propagandistic function of his productions. From Mussolini's perspective, this was untrue, for Pirandello had presented such tours as the way for him to "svolgere una diretta azione politica."[110] Instead, facing hostility in Argentina, he reneged.

When news of the debacle reached Italy, the Maestro had some explaining to do. In an interview with *Il Tevere*, which was then re-circulated by *La Stampa* (it was evidently important to get the word out), Pirandello claimed that in Argentina the large anti-fascist press corps had attacked him and the regime for months: since his visit had been announced. What may have sounded to anti-fascists or those who weren't aware of the situation like "cauteloso riserbo" was simply an attempt to safeguard his company from the hardship negative press would bring. And though he claimed that the trip – like those before it in France, England, and Germany – was in fact only "artistic," he noted that its official character was evidenced by the very virulence with which he was attacked.[111]

---

[109] Luigi Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, ed. Benito Ortolani, Mondadori, Milano 1995, letters 320206 and 320213, pp. 920-22, 926-29.
[110] Alberto Cesare Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo. Pirandello e Bragaglia. Documenti inediti negli archivi italiani*. Bulzoni, Roma 1974, doc. 3, p. 130-32.
[111] Pupo, *Interviste a Pirandello*, cit. pp. 388-90. For lengthier accounts of the whole affair, see Elio Providenti, *Pirandello impolitico*, cit., pp. 141-48 and Gabriele Cacho Millet, *Pirandello in Argentina*, Novecento, Palermo

The explanation was a clumsy one, but this was likely a result of a real discomfort over the situation the playwright found himself in: negotiating his needs and expectations with the duce's wouldn't have been easy, and the boundaries he had tried to draw weren't as clear as he might have imagined them. His suggestion that it wasn't with his plays that he could do propaganda, but by speaking in favor of fascism, was fair enough – yet complicated in practice. To imagine a performance completely dislocated in a spectator's mind from its intermission chat is difficult; Pirandello essentially envisioned the "free" execution of his theatrical art, almost as if it were a painting inside a fascist frame that was supposed to be ignored when it came to judging the qualities of the painting itself but whose presence nonetheless remained and conditioned, in more or less obtrusive ways, the presentation of the work as a whole. Proceeding in such a fashion allowed him to argue that, for his company, it was all about the art – and his art wasn't propaganda. Nevertheless, it was true, some viewers wouldn't forget about the frame, as it was known the world over that Pirandello was one of Mussolini's biggest fans. And, in fact, his company was funded by the government.

Pirandello's defense of the Teatro d'Arte and himself, though, reveals his dislike of being kept on too tight of a leash and connotes a rebellion against any image of him as a regime propagandist, rather than the darling of modern theatre whose work was hailed across the globe. Augusto Turati, then secretary of the PNF, summoned Pirandello upon his return from Argentina and questioned him about the affair, a dossier of all the related press reports lying open on his desk. Years later, the Maestro's friend Corrado Alvaro reported that an irate Pirandello tore up his party card and ripped his fascist badge from his jacket: he wound up so angry, it was the hierarch who was forced to apologize and make amends. Pirandello obviously suffered the treatment he received, for when he returned to Buenos Aires in 1933,

---

1987. Providenti, who also notes that Pirandello's behavior in Argentina was in direct contradiction to his earlier pledges, suggests that the Maestro's frustration over what he considered half-hearted support for the Teatro d'Arte led to his cooler sentiments during the tour.

he never wanted to be left alone with the press, for fear of further missteps, and consequences to them.[112]

There were several ups and downs in the playwright's relationship with Mussolini and the regime over the next few years: the Teatro degli Undici folded for lack of funding (the duce would only give so much); this seemed like a bad sign for the National Theatre project, and in fact that mission took two steps backward for every one forward. What was more, Mussolini didn't do as much as Pirandello would've liked to control the trust that liked to keep him out of the best theatres. The dramatist increasingly spent time abroad, which the regime didn't look upon too favorably. And yet, the duce selected Pirandello as one of the first distinguished members of the Royal Academy of Academics when it was inducted in 1929: this the playwright could've well expected, but he was pleased enough about the ceremony to tell Marta Abba, "Entrando e vedendomi, Mussolini mi sorrise e mi salutò con la mano: fece questo atto confidenziale a me solo."[113] But then in December of 1931 the dramatist would be twice-offended over the Verga speech: first, Mussolini didn't attend the event. He said he was very tired, but then went to the theatre that evening (to see a play by an English Pirandello-imitator, the original brooded). Then came the "brutto carattere" judgment, which, as we've seen, made the dramatist positively explode.

The next crisis would come in 1934, when Mussolini displayed a "brutto carattere" of his own, provoking the utter failure of *La favola del figlio cambiato*, book by Pirandello and music by Gian Francesco Malipiero, when it had its Italian premiere at the Royal Opera Theatre in Rome. The work had debuted to great fanfare in Germany – with Hitler attending its opening – but then, Italian papers reported, had been shut down for its offense to morality and authority and because its modernist music was then judged essentially "degenerate" in

[112] Providenti cites Alvaro's recounting of Pirandello's convocation by Turati (to be found in his introduction to Pirandello's *Novelle per un anno*), but calls them into question, saying that they seemed too much inspired by Alvaro's imagination of Pirandello and conditioned by his own complex relationship toward the duce (though such objections seem little justified).
[113] Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba,* cit., letter 291028, pp. 295-96.

Nazi eyes. Pirandello suspected that these stories were in large part fabricated by the Italian press to create troubles for him and his partner: they were two extraordinarily successful, and therefore envied, men. All things considered, the composer wrote to Mussolini a few weeks before the opening – scheduled for March 24, 1934 – and asked if it might not be better to postpone it; he was reassured that his fears were exaggerated.[114] *La favola*'s two creators requested an audience with the duce before the opening; it was denied, but his intent to be present opening night was confirmed. Pirandello was reassured. As he wrote to Abba, "Ci sarà questa sera, senza dubbio, una grossa battaglia, e speriamo che la presenza del Duce varrà almeno a contenerla in qualche modo."[115]

But Pirandello didn't know that Mussolini had other plans. He had already discussed the libretto with his censorship official, Leopoldo Zurlo, more than once. The play was based on a Sicilian legend and folk tale, about a mother whose bouncing baby boy is stolen by witches and exchanged for the deformed son born to the King and Queen; the woman is told that her son will be raised with the riches and glories of a Prince if only she will take care of the deformed boy with loving affection. Zurlo found a passage that he thought should be cut, because it could be interpreted as disrespectful of authority (even if only in a typically Pirandellian way), but he didn't feel up to the task of censoring the Maestro, and therefore asked Mussolini to take a look. That small cut was indeed made, with Pirandello's most gallant understanding. The passage, a line spoken by the Prince, was edited as follows:

> Credete a me,
> non importa che sia
> questa o quella persona:
> ~~importa la corona!~~
> ~~Cangiate questa di carta o vetraglia~~
> ~~in una d'oro di gemme di vaglia,~~
> ~~il mantelletto in un manto,~~
> ~~e il re del burla diventa sul serio,~~

[114] *Ivi*, letters 340319, 340329, pp. 1113-1117, 1119-1122. In the March 29 letter, he attests that the show was still meeting with success in Germany. See also Mary Ann Frese Witt, "Fascist Discourse and Pirandellian Theatre," in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 91.2 (1992), pp. 303-31.
[115] Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, cit., letter 340324, p. 1117.

~~a cui voi v'inchinate.~~
Non c'e' bisogno d'altro soltanto
che lo crediate.[116]

But when news of the trouble in Germany broke, the censor checked back in with the Capo, acknowledging again that the play could suggest a lack of reverence for authority, but in Pirandello's case, it would make more sense to interpret such an idea as philosophical, rather than political. The duce wrote "yes," in agreement in on the report, but aloud he announced to the police chief, who was go-between him and Zurlo, "La censura a quell'opera la farò io."[117]

And he did: from his box in the theatre, half-way through the show. He had evidently liked the first act and showed his approval, but during the second act made his displeasure – apparently over a scene in a brothel – known to one and all. *Giustizia e libertà*, newspaper of the anti-fascist resistance published in France, reported perhaps hyperbolically that "si mise a passeggiare su e giù per il palco lanciando fulmini contro la commissione di censura del Teatro Reale."[118] He left before the show came to an end; an abashed Pirandello, running into him, didn't even want to say "hello." The audience only grew more rebellious as the evening went on, the *Tribuna* reported several days later: "Al terzo atto la situazione si è aggravata. […] La tempesta si è scatenata in pieno durante l'interludio a sipario calato, tra il quarto e quinto quadro. Trovandosi in un'oscurità favorevole, gli oppositori si sono disfrenati furiosamente […]"[119] Pirandello and Malipiero had hoped for – and been assured of – Mussolini's protection. Instead, this looked like an ambush.

[116] The original documents are to be found in ACS MCP UCT b. 454 f. 8563 as well as ACS PCM. 1934-36 f. 3-2-12 no. 933, b. 1886.
[117] Leopoldo Zurlo, *Memorie inutile*.cit., p. 131.
[118] The article is conserved in the ACS Political police files, but several of these documents, including the one in question, are published in Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo,* cit., p. 216. *Giustizia e libertà*'s accounts need to be taken with a grain of salt, as they tend to report sometimes imprecise details. Here is a classic case: the censorship commission was one man, under Mussolini's direct supervision, so Mussolini couldn't have railed against the Opera Theatre. He could've made general comments about censorship, however; if indeed the outburst had been planned, acting as if something that night surprised him legitimated the ban on the show that would follow the next day.
[119] Andrea Bisicchia, *Pirandello in scena. Il linguaggio della rappresentazione*, UTET, Novara 2007, p. 175.

The angry authors both wrote to the duce, asking for an explanation, but nothing came until they appealed to Bottai to talk to the duce. *Giustizia e libertà* mirthfully reported that the Maestro had been told that Mussolini "ha proibito ulteriori rappresentazioni del '*Figlio cambiato*' perché *così gli è parso*" – a clear play on Pirandello's title *Così è, se vi pare*, and a would-be reminder to the playwright who was boss. As their story went, a fuming Pirandello took the letter with him to the artists' and intellectuals' hangout, the Caffe Aragno, and showed it to one and all. But internal government correspondence – the regime of course monitored the paper – suggests that this was just a malicious rumor. [120] The paper nonetheless rather perceptively fictionalized the dynamic that reigned between duce and dramatist. It's almost believable, for that "così gli è parso" could seem a direct response to the problematic passage from *La favola*: he, Mussolini, wore the crown – and no matter what the crown was made of, Pirandello and anyone else would bow to his authority if he required them to. Power lied in the ability to exercise it: in the ability to put all the speculation and debate to rest with a single gesture.

Nervous about what such a gesture could mean, the beleaguered creators sent Bottai to talk to the duce as well, who reported back to mutual friend Massimo Bontempelli,

> Vi dirò a voce al mio ritorno del lungo colloquio, dal quale ho tratta la convinzione che siamo dinanzi a un giudizio *personale* sfavorevole, *non alle persone*, per le quali ha avute alte attestazioni di stima, ma per questa loro opera. Sono riuscita a farmi promettere, che riceverà entrambi i nostri amici, per esprimere loro la sua ammirazione e parlare di ciò che si attende dalla loro collaborazione. Se Pirandello e Malipiero chiederanno, magari attraverso Marpicati, un'udienza troveranno il terreno preparato.[121]

They never did meet to clear the air, but Bottai's reassurance that neither of the men had to worry that this event was an ugly portent for other projects indicated Mussolini's desire to

[120] Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo,* cit., p. 216; additional documents in Pirandello's police files (ACS PolPol Lugi Pirandello) attest to the discontent Pirandello voiced after the incident, but also that no telegram as described in the article was sent. Alberti notes that there are, additionally, traces in the archives of an entire file of correspondence with or about Pirandello that is now lost. The censor's cuts to one section of the text are conserved in the censorship files, ACS MCP UCT, b. 454 f. 8563.
[121] Pirandello transcribed Bottai's letter in his own to Abba, *Lettere a Marta Abba,* cit., letter 340329, p. 1121.

keep this event an isolated one. Perhaps in part because it truly was a "personal" response to the play: months later, Malipiero would report to Pirandello that a woman who had found herself seated next to the duce at a dinner told him that, the duce said, he had taken offense at the theatre that night and for that reason he hadn't wished to see *La favola*'s creators afterwards; now he would see them most willingly – evidently, his ire had passed.[122]

Pirandello was hurt, but perhaps felt he had no other choice but to lick his wounds. The incident had certainly been a blow; as we learn from a letter he wrote to Malipiero in August, he preferred to not even think about the piece (which Maliperio wanted to revise), as it only reminded him of the insult they had suffered. His aversion to it even prevented him from taking up his perpetually unfinished *I giganti della montagna*, as parts of *La favola* are used in that metatheatrical drama: "Quella ch'è forse la mia opera maggiore di teatro m'è restata lì da allora; invece di terminarla, se mai la terminerò, mi sono messo a un altro lavoro."[123] But, there were plenty of reasons to move on. For one thing, Pirandello was in close collaboration with regime officials as President of the upcoming Convegno Volta, which would host the most important practitioners of contemporary international theatre to discuss the state of the art. In that context he would put aside his distaste for d'Annunzio and direct his *La figlia di Jorio* – once more, with the duce in attendance.

And, there was the fact that Pirandello had long been jockeying to win the Nobel Prize for literature, and he didn't think he could do it without the duce's help. If in 1922 he told his daughter he was unlikely to win such an honor despite his ever-growing international fame, precisely because he wasn't in the necessary political circles, already by 1926 he was; and when he heard rumors of his candidature, he insisted that Mussolini intervene; despite assurances that steps would be taken, nothing came of it: Shaw won that year, and Grazia

[122] Letter from Malipiero to Pirandello, July 25, 1934, "Il carteggio Pirandello-Malipiero," ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, in *Ariel* I.3 (1986), p. 134.
[123] *Ivi*, p. 137.

Deledda the next.[124] A Swedish journalist later told Pirandello that in reality the Italian dictator – afraid of sparking d'Annunzio's jealousy – had actually impeded his victory. This may not be true: aside from the fact that the Vate claimed to lack the envy gene and also said he that he never expected the Nobel – it required you to be perceived as an austere person, something he most decidedly was not![125] – we know now that Pirandello was never even nominated until the year he won. By 1932, he was getting closer, with fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile and Mussolini's Minister of Justice Alfredo Rocco, President of the International Cultural Institute in Paris, pushing for his candidacy in their respective international circles. Still bereft of the honor in 1934, the dramatist wrote to his muse, leading actress, and chief object of desire, Marta Abba, "Non mi resta altro santo a cui votarmi, se nemmeno quest'anno vorranno assegnarmi il Premio Nobel."[126] But he did win. Rumors surrounding his victory were split: some said that the duce intervened when it looked as if Benedetto Croce was going to win instead; Pirandello would've been a choice better appreciated by the regime, he let it be known. Others said that he was jealous of Pirandello, for he had hoped to win the Peace Prize that year.[127] In any case, that Mussolini and the regime stood behind Pirandello is evidenced by not only the fact that it was the Italian Academy to officially nominate him, but also by the Nobel commission's explicit acknowledgment that the support of his own government gave him a leg up on other candidates.[128]

---

[124] See Providenti, *Pirandello impolitico*, cit., p. 174; Pirandello, *Nel tempo della lontananza,* letters 45 and 48, pp. 108-09, 111-17.
[125] Tom Antongini, *D'Annunzio annedottico*, cit., p. 169-70.
[126] Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, cit., letters 310427, 321201, 340805, pp. 744, 1061, 1139.
[127] This according to censor Leopoldo Zurlo (a reliable source), said Corrado Alvaro in 1950. *Cronache e scritti teatrali*, ed. Alfredo Barbina, Edizioni Abete, Roma 1976, p. 305. Providenti, in *Pirandello impolitico*, stresses what he reads as hostility on Mussolini's part toward Pirandello's victory in the interviews with De Begnac.
[128] "L'Italia dei premi Nobel," in *Atlante della letteratura italiana* Vol. III, ed. Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà, Einaudi, Torino 2012, pp. 546-50. Nonetheless, as spy reports note, several fascists were disappointed that Pirandello and not d'Annunzio took home the coveted prize, if for no other reason than that he seemed more committed to fascism than Pirandello, who tried to separate politics and art. Others claimed that Pirandello's relativism was devoid of the synthesis that was representative of the corporative age, and that the Academy's decision to award the prize to him was meant as a refutation of fascist corporativism. ACS PolPol, Luigi

The last power play between duce and dramatist would come with the latter's death. Mussolini found it hard to believe that many could mourn the Maestro's passing more than he would; but he was reportedly even more upset by the instructions Pirandello had left: he absolutely wanted a simple and modest burial – not the State funeral that could've been given him. Informed of these last wishes, an irate duce pounded his fists on his desk, and insisted that no one be told of the request. Whether or not this was a refusal of fascism, as one scholar has declared, it certainly deprived Mussolini of a glorious chance to once more take full advantage of the reflexive prestige his most "umile e obbediente gregario" shone on the blackshirt regime.[129]

*

Adriano Tilgher's Life-Form reading served as an ubiquitous basis for understanding Luigi Pirandello's plays and also, later, for determining their "fascism." Generally speaking, if one saw in Pirandello's oeuvre a positive, productive response to the dualism quandary Tilgher had identified, he was apt to see the works as representative of the new era and expressions of fascist thought. If instead the author was judged to be pessimistic or resigned – paralyzed into inaction – the most common response was something like this one: "Pirandello è un buon e forse ottimo fascista, ma che il suo teatro rappresenti una concezione della vita quale il Fascismo cerca di formarla negl'italiani, questo poi no."[130]

When a debate regarding Pirandello's fascism sprung up on the pages of *Critica fascista* in 1927, it was around the Tilgherian fulcrum it turned. Already in 1920 the philosopher had concluded that Pirandello's world was a terribly desolate one: "Dopo l'urto improvviso e brutale," he wrote, "tutto ritorna *come prima*, anzi, *peggio di prima*, perché

Pirandello See also Sarah Zappulla Muscarà, "Luigi Pirandello: Il Premio Nobel o della solitudine," La Catinella, Caatania 2002, p. 334.

[129] Arcangelo Leone De Castris, "Pirandello e il fascismo," in Enzo Lauretta, ed. *Pirandello e la politica.* Atti del Convegno di Agrigento, Mursia, Milano 1991-1992, p. 175. (It should be said, however, that in general terms this is a rather mediocre volume.) On the duce's reaction, see Giudice, *Pirandello*, cit., p. 164; Corrado Alvaro, prefazione a Pirandello, *Novelle per un anno*, ed. Manlio LoVecchio-Musti, Milano, Mondadori 1956.

[130] Gherardo Casini, in *Critica fascista*, 1 June 1927, p. 212.

l'illusione giace a terra con le ali rotte, senza più forza di muoversi e di agire, e nessun raggio d'ideale scende più ad illuminare la notte triste della realtà triviale e fangosa."[131] In the battle between life and form, form won: l'immobile maschera ha ucciso la Vita che corre e fluisce."[132] Critics who put Pirandello's work into a non-fascist camp did so on the grounds that such a nihilistic view could hardly be considered fascist. As future director general of the MinCulPop, Gherardo Casini – the author of the "poi no" quote cited above – put it, "Egli ti dice che l'azione è illusione, e questo può esser vero per lui artista, per lui individuo, ma è falso per l'uomo che vive nell'umanità."[133]

The notion of action as illusion, rather than that which actually made reality, couldn't have been more antithetical to the fascist mindset; not coincidentally, Giovanni Gentile – thinker behind the concept of *actual idealism* – judged the Maestro's philosophy to be "true, but insufficient": "è un relativismo vertiginoso che scrolla il mondo della fede e dell'azione, e getta l'uomo in una solitudine infinita e paurosa."[134] Journalist Giacomo Lumbroso essentially agreed, contending however that the problem of Pirandello's theatre wasn't so much a non-fascist viewpoint, but precisely that it wasn't "theatre": art must affirm and create, but Pirandello negated and destroyed; he didn't make a great fascist artist because he didn't make those "creature umane ed immortali" that were the stuff of cultural posterity.[135] Despite Lumbroso's rhetorical confusion, it can't escape our notice that the problem is always the same: a destructive, passive, or nihilist vision was antithetical to fascism's active, *creative* impulse. Alessandro Pavolini – the cultivated Florentine who would be Minister of Popular Culture before finding his death alongside Mussolini in Piazzale Loreto – had his

[131] Adriano Tilgher, "Il teatro dello specchio," in *Il problema centrale*, cit., p. 118.
[132] Tilgher, "*Enrico IV* di Luigi Pirandello," in *Il problema centrale*, cit., p. 236.
[133] Casini, in *Critica fascista*, cit. p. 212.
[134] Giovanni Macchia, *Pirandello o la stanza della tortura*, Mondadori, Milano 1994, p. 83-4. See also Leonardo Lattarulo, "Pirandello tra Croce e Gentile," in *Ariel* I.3 (1986), pp. 59-68.
[135] Lumbroso here seems to be adopting the ideas of Massimo Bontempelli, who argued that the new fascist art must work to create new myths and characters, timeless and universal, for the modern age. Bontempelli wouldn't have taken such a stand on Pirandello, though, as we'll see further on.

say, too. He defended Pirandello's fascism and *Italianità*, and lamented that such a one as the anti-fascist Tilgher had emerged as the playwright's chief interpreter.[136]

Readings of Pirandello's work as fascist, nonetheless, departed from the philosopher's equation as well; the difference was that they found positive resolution of the crisis that he had identified – as we've seen in Mussolini's suggestion that Pirandello's plays taught that "il mondo è come vogliamo che sia." In this view, of course, whether form wins over life isn't as important as the choice to take action and thereby potentially shape a new reality: such characters as Enrico IV and the Father in *Six Characters* are models from this perspective. Pirandello explained for the fascist newspaper *L'Impero* that in the flow of life between competing realities, there was joy because, "Viene poi, d'un tratto, una volta ogni secolo (o ogni millennio?) la personalità strapotente, massima, ch'abbraccia e fonde i centomila intorno ad un'unica realtà assoluta ch'egli vede e crea per tutti. Il genio riceve perciò, come avviene in Italia per Mussolini, il riconoscimento totale e concorde della sua realtà."[137] In other words, Mussolini played out in life the situation Pirandello dramatized: for the playwright, the duce became a tragic hero in his own right – one who shared a great deal with the characters Pirandello brought to life, as well as with the heroes of the Nietzschean and LeBonian imagination.[138]

When, in 1932, Mussolini declared Pirandello's theatre "fascist," then, he was pronouncing his view on a long-standing debate in the regime's intellectual circles; to this extent, his ideas were not original; they were personal elaborations on a philosophical-aesthetic debate surrounding, if not the figure of P. Randello – at the satirical press dubbed him – his opus. However, it was an opinion arrived at over time and through serious

[136] The series of articles about Pirandello's fascism appeared in *Critica fascista* on June 1 (Pavolini, Casini) and 15 (Lumbroso) and July 15 (Camillo Pellizzi), 1927.
[137] Interview with Pietro Lissia, in *L'Impero*, cit., p. 504-08.
[138] Pirandello described Mussolini this way several times; for more commentary on his "construction of Mussolini as modern tragic hero," and in this way even a prototype for his own characters, see Witt, *The Search for Modern Tragedy*, chapter three.

reflection. The duce's response to Pirandello's writing, much of which he became acquainted with at the playhouse, was complex: vacillating, nuanced and perceptive. As we'll see, on occasion he wondered if Pirandello wasn't in fact, somewhere down deep, guilty of the anti-revolutionary pessimism that some saw in his works. And yet, he always returned to the same conclusion: Pirandello was absolutely committed to him and to fascism, and his opus expressed, absolutely, a vision of life compatible with fascism's philosophical precepts.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the dictator's approach to Pirandello is that he didn't distinguish between the man and his works as many scholars since have: whereas academics have used the literature to interpret the actions of the man – better, to negate them, most often arguing that they reveal private feelings that belie the public fascism – Mussolini found in Pirandello's public actions the key to reading his literature and, therefore, his private thoughts. Talking with De Begnac, he explained that for some time he had seen Pirandello's thinking distant from his own, but then came the Maestro's bold gesture of joining the PNF in its darkest hour – when so many others nestled quietly in the den of "afascism," in the midst of the Matteotti crisis:

> Quel gesto di solidarietà mi rafforzò nel volere che nulla della rivoluzione andasse perduto. Oggi capisco quanto fosse stata nel carattere del pensiero pirandelliano quella sua determinazione. Credevo – prima di allora – che Pirandello fosse il poeta dell'indecisione. E, invece, questo mio amico eminente è il poeta della certezza, colui che ci toglie dall'indecisione dimostrando quanto sia inutile analizzare quel che è certo; e quanto sia necessario non occuparsi dell'ombra, della nebbia, della palude, se, di là, splendono cielo, mare, sole della vita.[139]

It was a critical awakening for Mussolini, in other words: that which made him see that decision – the moment in which one decides to act – and not contemplation interested the Sicilian dramatist.

This was in effect a rather astute observation about a playwright most often criticized for philosophizing. That even the best of Pirandello's drama suffers from a verbosity that

[139] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani*, cit., p. 346.

risks degenerating into inaction is hard to deny – one contemporary even (most exaggeratedly) commented that *Sei personaggi* was "in gran parte superfluo."[140] The plays also frequently deny resolution. And yet, we ought not mistake this lack, or even the pieces' dramaturgical flaws, as cerebralism that amounted to disinterest, on either the author's or characters' part, in action. It's true, for instance that *Sei personaggi* reflects on the Maestro's obsessive theme of competing truths and – as the ultimate metatheatrical drama – on the blurred boundary between reality and fiction, life and art. But on the level of action, the play does something entirely different: the six characters come to the theatre in an absolutely desperate and unrelenting quest not just to share their story but through that sharing – that enactment – live out their reality.[141] The piece shows their successful fight to convince the *capocomico* to make a play out of their story, and their performing it for a group of actors who must learn how to play them correctly. Their attempts to stage the tragic story are frequently waylaid by arguments among them and with the actors (about their past, about performance details) and by the son's refusal to participate in the acting. But the characters are there to enact their story, not to chatter and philosophize about their woes. This truth is underscored by Pirandello, who repeatedly has the play's personages tell the others to get on with it.

Indeed, "getting on with it" emerges as a theme in *Sei personaggi*. As the *capocomico* prepares to rehearse the "second act" of the characters' play with them, an actress' use of the word "illusion" to describe the performance upsets the Father, who points out that this so-called illusion is the only reality he and the other five characters have: their realities are fixed in the story the author imagined for them. He tries to make the *capocomico* understand the

[140] Camillo Pellizzi, in the *Critica fascista* debate (15 luglio 1927), who not surprisingly judged Pirandello's work as non-fascist.

[141] In his 1937 review of *I giganti della montagna*, Alberto Savinio brilliantly wrote that Pirandello's 'philosophical ideas' were not of interest: they were merely "i temi, i pretesi, diciamo addirittura i 'trucchi' che alimentavano il 'dramma' di Luigi Pirandello: il 'dramma del passaggio': l'affannosa, allucinata ricerca di una evasione da 'questo mondo,' lo sbocco in un mondo 'superiore.' *Palchetti romani*, ed. Alessandro Tinterri, Adelphi, Roma 2009 [1982], p. 65.

difference between the two of them: "un personaggio ha veramente una vita sua, segnata di caratteri suoi, per cui è sempre 'qualcuno.' Mentre un uomo – non dico lei, adesso – un uomo così, in genere, può non essere 'nessuno.'"[142] The *capocomico* misunderstands the implications and takes offense, but the Father is really only trying to tell him that he, the man, has the advantage: while the characters' reality, most terribly, "non può cangiare, ne essere altra, mai," a person's – the *capocomico*'s – can.[143] And so, he begs him to take a lesson from their encounter, urging him to "uscire da questo giuoco – d'arte! d'arte! – che lei è solito di fare qua coi suoi attori; e torna a domandarle seriamente: chi è lei?"[144] This isn't an encouragement to give up the creative act, but to apply the creative forces to his own life, rather than reproducing the fictions of others and sliding into complacency in his own life. For the *capocomico,* the Father cries, what seemed like reality yesterday, or some time past, now reveals itself to be an illusion, just as the characters' reality for the actors is an only illusion. The characters have no choice but to do what they're doing, attempting to give themselves "un significato che l'autore non si sognò mai di dargli."[145]

This is a moment of the play that risks being interpreted as poetic waxing. But it's not. The Father's invitation to the *capocomico* is to do precisely the same thing they are: to never settle for the incomplete life another would give him, but fight to create his own, to receive the same "riconoscimento totale e concorde della sua realtà" that the six characters are achieving by performing their story – and that Pirandello had claimed the duce was obtaining for himself.[146] The argument echoes Zarathustra's, who urges the necessity of breaking away from the flock, and from the norms established by others. "Quando i personaggi sono vivi,

[142] Pirandello, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore,* in *Maschere* Nude, ed. Italo Borzi and Maria Argenziano, Newton Compton, Roma 2007 [1993], p. 61-62.
[143] *Ivi*, p. 62.
[144] *Ivi*, p. 61.
[145] *Ibidem*.
[146] Luca Ronconi's magisterial 2012 *In cerca d'autore*, a study of *Sei personaggi* with the students of the Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica Silvio d'Amico, beautifully rendered the urgency of this scene and of the Father's advice to the *capocomico*, driving home that this wasn't a mere break in the action, but a rather pained and violent insistence that the *capocomico* realize what little control he had over his own destiny.

vivi veramente davanti al loro autore," the Father says, "questo non fa altro che seguirli nelle parole, nei gesti, che essi appunto gli propongono; e bisogna ch'egli li voglia come essi si vogliono; e guai se non fa così!"[147] The characters failed to impose themselves and their will on their author, who left their story incomplete, but they accomplish their mission with the *capocomico*. The play enacts their victory in this quest, however devastating their story remains.

After Pirandello's death, Mussolini would tell De Begnac, he felt guilty for having begun to nurture doubts that the writer's excavations of "the area of doubt" was an unproductive enterprise. He thought about the anxieties Pirandello gave voice to, and his attachment to him. He began to see this not as an event of the playwright's life, he said, but "come un modo di proteggere la mia, di avvertirmi del rischio sulla porta di casa, o già dentro le mie stanze. Ma come un'esortazione a guardare nel fondo della palude, per quel che fosse stato possibile penetrare l'opacità terrorizzante."[148] With d'Annunzio's dramas, we've seen the duce's tendency to find his own struggles in those of the characters; here, too, in quite narcissistic fashion, he imagines a sort of coded message for himself in Pirandello's work; Pirandello was encouraging him, he thought, to look into the abyss in just the same way the Father urged on the *capocomico*.

Vestire gli ignudi – the play the duce didn't like – is the mirror opposite of *Sei personaggi*: if the force behind that drama is action, the attempt to overcome the fixedness of art to live life, the protagonists of *Vestire gli ignudi* seek refuge from life in art, and in suicide.[149] Ersilia Drei, a nanny, finally gives into her employer's advances when her

[147] Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi,* cit., p. 62
[148] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani,* cit., p. 350.
[149] Roberto Alonge notes that the plays are opposite, but in a different sense: that whereas the *capocomico* in *Sei personaggi* cannot handle the extreme true story of the characters and censors its representation, telling the Stepdaughter that certain things are inappropriate for the stage, here the artist figure, novelist Ludovico Nota, eventually accepts his characters' true story – rather than the one he had imagined for her – and will use it as the basis for a new piece of writing. *Pirandello tra realismo e mistificazione*, Guida, Napoli 1977 [1972], p. 264-65. On a deeper level, however, the *capocomico* does give up his artistic omnipotence, allowing the six characters to impose their production, and himself getting carried away by it. His inability to know what is fiction and what is

boyfriend, Franco Laspiga, leaves her for another woman. In the moment of her tryst with the Console Grotti, she leaves his and his wife's child unattended on the balcony, and the child falls to her death. Grotti's wife discovers them and turns Ersilia out. Mortified and guilt-ridden, she offers herself to the first man who passes by, and then further ashamed, attempts to commit suicide. In the hospital, expecting to die, she makes up a story for a journalist, saying that she did it for love of Laspiga. Her reason for lying is simple: everyone tries to dress themselves in a cloak of respectability, for outside eyes. One of many readers moved by her story, Ludovico Nota goes to the hospital; he hopes to rescue her and make her his own. The play begins with their arrival at his home. As the three acts unfold, both Laspiga and Grotti come in search of Ersilia, and the truth of her story is revealed. Nota gives up his hopes to live a new life with her – "Un romanzo, cara, o si scrive o si vive,"[150] he had told Ersilia – and supports Laspiga's futile attempts to win her back, deciding that her story would make a good novel or play after all. In the end, Ersilia kills herself, and in her final monologue tells Laspiga and Grotti to return to their women: she would die naked, rather than clothed in the respectability she so desired.

It's easy to imagine all the reasons such a play wouldn't have appealed to Mussolini. While *Vestire gli ignudi* doesn't lack theatrical touches, it suffers a tendency to rehash what happens before and elsewhere – an element of the play that made it "assai faticoso" to watch, according to d'Amico.[151] It seems based on, rather than critical of, the sort of squalid bourgeois love triangles the duce and his men of the theatre despised; Tilgher, in point of fact, warned against viewing it as a step backward (after *Sei personaggi* and l'*Enrico IV*) into petit-bourgeois comedy but nonetheless conceded that its world was "piccolo-borghese e

---

reality, at the end of the play, shows the Father's successful forcing him to direct their story for them: "e guai se non fa così!"

[150] Pirandello, *Vestire gli ignudi*, in *Maschere Nude*, cit., p. 417.

[151] d'Amico, *Cronache* II.I. p. 206.

meschino."[152] And finally, as noted, the play shows an escape from action rather than recourse to it. This is certainly true of Ludovico Nota, who all too easily renounces his quest to "live a novel rather than write it," and in this his Pygmalionic ambitions to imagine Ersilia not as the woman he read about, but as a different Ersilia who would live a new life without old memories: "Un'altra," he tells her, "per come puoi essere."[153]

But Nota's retiring attitude toward the whole event – he'll simply record her story as he's learned it – is consonant with the play's theme as a whole. Ersilia's two attempts at suicide are escapes from her life of squalor: they are acts of subtraction. Nor did the lie she told have a productive purpose; she didn't do it to bring Laspiga back to her but, on the contrary, regrets that the lie has such an effect. Ersilia wanted to change neither her situation nor that of the others involved, but merely give herself, "per la morte, almeno, una vestina decente."[154] The strange passivity of such a gesture perplexes Nota, who ruminates, "Possono essere utili per la vita, non per la morte, certe menzogne."[155] But it is consistent with Ersilia's belief that life happens *to* a person, and so Laspiga has no fault in her affair; one scholar notes that this proposition, an argument against human agency, "rappresenta il tessuto ideologico della commedia."[156] Ersilia, indeed, insists upon it, when she exclaims, "Non sono stati gli altri! Non sei stato tu! – La vita è stata!"[157] Never imagining herself able to become "someone" other than what all the men in her life imagine for her, when even her attempt to tell a different story about herself unravels, she gives up on the possibility that "il mondo è come vogliamo che sia," and bids her final farewell.

Ersilia's pessimism and the choice of self-annihilation in the absence of bourgeois respectability would've been in both Pirandello's and Mussolini's eyes perfectly coherent

[152] Tilgher, *Il problema centrale*, cit., p. 253.
[153] Pirandello, *Vestire gli ignudi*, cit., p. 418.
[154] *Ivi*, p. 449.
[155] *Ivi*, p. 445.
[156] Italo Borzi, preface to *Vestire gli ignudi*, in *Maschere nude*, cit., p. 413.
[157] Pirandello, *Vestire gli ignudi*, cit., p. 436.

character traits. D'Amico's characterization of the woman who wanted to "comporsi almeno per la bara una bianca vesticciola di fidanzata" underscores the extent to which she desired a traditional life.[158] For Mussolini, the traditionalist was "colui il quale, rivestita l'assisa del rivoluzionario, impedisce alla rivoluzione di entrare, per la comune, nella storia," and when he broached the subject with Pirandello, the writer agreed, suggesting that the traditionalist's principal trait was pessimism: "E ce la mette tutta […] per piegare al proprio volere, alla propria voluttà di stasi, il tempo che viene, e la rivoluzione che, ognora, giunge molto da lontano.[159] A perfect description of Ersilia's behavior, who kills herself, without any desire to change things for the future and, as we've seen, sends the men back to life as it was before her tragedy happened.

The doubts Mussolini would later regret having are well justified by a play like *Vestire gli ignudi*; and in fact the unproductivity he had seen in Pirandello's ruminations he attached to a traditionalist's pessimism like that of Ersilia – and also of Nota, the artist who retreats from life, in the end. The duce asked Pirandello if the traditionalist's pessimism wasn't his, too; the Maestro responded that "Il pessimismo è sfiducia in tutto," but he had "fede nella verità che ognuno nasconde, in quanto desiderio di luce, nel buio profondo del proprio cuore."[160] It wasn't until after Pirandello died that the duce would become convinced; as he told De Begnac, for a time he had felt that the Nobel laureate had a mistaken view of the regime as one who had restored power to the bourgeois it had first removed from office. The revolution had nothing to do with Pirandello, he had suspected: "Forse, lo teme. Certamente, rifiuta di esserne cittadino. Guarda a taluni di noi come dei personaggi mancati, o mancati al suo teatro di poesia, più che di azione."[161]

[158] d'Amico, *Cronache,* cit., II.I, p. 204.
[159] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani,* cit., p. 338.
[160] *Ivi*, p. 338.
[161] *Ivi*, p. 444.

At least to a certain extent, it seems to have been Pirandello's swan song, *I giganti della montagna*, that changed his mind: a fact all the more interesting because that play, more than any other of Pirandello's opus, has been analyzed as a critique of fascism and the Mussolini regime. The duce had never doubted the writer's commitment to him and his cause, but it wasn't until Pirandello's death in December of 1936 and after that he returned to certainty about his mission, and his activist, revolutionary mindset – even if he recognized that, perhaps, the writer left this world unsatisfied. *I giganti* premiered posthumously – and incomplete – in 1937, though Mussolini noted that he had talked about the work in progress with its creator and also read the portions of it (three of four "movements," two of three acts) published in 1931 and '34.[162] When Pirandello died, the duce heard about the ending from his relatives, presumably his son Stefano, who had written up a long description of how the final act was to be, based on his dying father's instructions.

In the play, an ex-actress and now Countess and her husband the Count lead her acting troupe to the villa of a magician named Cotrone. There they hope to perform the play of a talented young poet who killed himself for love of the Countess (the play is Pirandello's *La favola del figlio cambiato*). Ridden with guilt, she has come back to the stage only to perform it, and insists upon continuing to do so, in homage to him and to the piece – to art – even if its unsuccessful productions have run her husband into financial ruin. The company is invited to stay with Cotrone and the "Scalognati" (the "jinxed") at the enchanted villa, where Cotrone enacts works of theatrical magic (making fireflies appear or mannequins come to life) for no one but himself and his companions or, at most, to scare intruders away. But Countess Ilse is unsatisfied with the idea of performing in isolation: the play should live amongst the people, even if taking high art to the common folk is always a risky enterprise.

[162] Pirandello began thinking about the play – and imagined its basics – as early as 1928, publishing the first act in 1931 and the second in 1934, considering it completed but then picking it up again (and of course never completing it). It premiered at the Maggio Musicale Festival in 1937 under Renato Simoni's direction. For a detailed discussion of its development from 1928 to 1936, see the chapter "La fragilità del teatro" in Claudio Vicentini, *Pirandello. Il disagio del teatro*, Marsilio, Venezia 1993.

Cotrone suggests that the troupe go into the village and play for a wedding feast to be held by the mountain giants, who aren't real giants but are referred to that way because they are big, muscular people who live in the mountains above: they've become somewhat hardened, uncultivated, thanks to their dedication to developing new technology and public works projects ("sono insomma i dominatori del mondo fisico – ma hanno dimenticato la poesia").[163] In the final act – of which we have only Stefano's description – the company acts not for the giants, who are too busy, but for the townspeople gathered for the wedding feast. A coarse and ignorant mass, they don't understand the play. They attack: Ilse dies, two of the company go missing. The giants offer the Count money in recompense; he weepingly accepts it, deciding to build a giant tomb to Ilse, like the Capulet and Montagues erect gilded statues of their two dead children, in remembrance and admonition.

I giganti della montagna continues to explore the nature and power of the theatrical arts, as so many of the Maestro's plays had done. Its author's experience as both a writer and working thespian were of clear inspiration to the piece that developed over nearly a decade. Two specific events were fundamental to its birth: some neighbors, a Count and Countess, throwing loads of money into a private theatre and thus themselves into ruin (Stefano thought of writing a play about them, but changed his mind); and a terrible tour of *Sei personaggi* in Sicily, where the peasant audience in the small town of Canicattì – ordered by their employers to go, so as to fill the theatre – absolutely didn't know what to make of it. A company member would recount years later:

> Quando è calato, o meglio non è calato il sipario – perché nei *Sei personaggi* il sipario non c'è – quei poveretti sono rimasti pietrificati e non si muovevano. Siamo dovuti andare fuori e dire: "guardate che è finito." Ma non si muovevano lo stesso perché pensavano che anche quella frase facesse parte della commedia. […] Mi ricordo che siamo partiti la mattina all'alba, in carrozza, con le tendine abbassate. E quasi tutti questi contadini erano riuniti

[163] d'Amico's observation in his review of the 1937 premier. *Cronache*, cit., IV.II., p. 358.

> sulla piazza, e Picasso aveva avuto un attimo di panico, e aveva detto: "qui ci crocchiano, perché pensano che li abbiamo preso in giro."[164]

But the Maestro's experiences more generally and as a *capocomico* – to be amply discussed in chapter three – also meant that he was no stranger to the financial hardship that commitment to great art could bring, or to the disappointment of a failed show, which the very same *Favola del figlio cambiato* that Ilse performs was, for the nebulous reasons described above. Nor was *Giganti* the first text in which Pirandello cast himself in the role of a misunderstood and unappreciated dramatist (though when he did so in *Sei personaggi*, he was self-effacing). Finally, that the men and women of Italian theatre saw their art form dying a slow death, in part at the hands of cinema and its technical capabilities and in part due to a more generalized superficiality of materialistic bourgeois culture, is a matter of course; this was a situation that, early on, Pirandello had said he wanted to confront in the play, which was to be about the conflict between a "spiritual" world and the "new materialistic" one.[165]

Who was at fault for the spiritual bankruptcy that murdered art? This question lies at the center of interpretations of the play – in criticism and on stage. A great deal of attention is given to the giants, though they never appear. Typically, they are read as being either the fascist regime or more generalized monsters of the modern technological and capitalist world, quite possibly the Americans whose country Pirandello had visited many times and found disturbing, as his comments upon return from New York in 1924 show: "L'America ha raggiunto il massimo punto di sviluppo della sua vita meccanica ed esteriore. Ed ora di questo gli eccessi più intelligenti sentono come un disagio e cominciano a interessarsi a tutto il nuovo movimento intellettuale e spirituale europeo."[166] Whatever – whoever – the cause,

[164] Rina Franchetti, cited in Claudio Vicentini, *Pirandello. Il disagio del teatro*, Marsilio, Venezia 1993, p. 191.
[165] Witt, *The Search for Modern Tragedy*, cit., p. 125.
[166] Interview by Luigi Bottazzi for the *Corriere della Sera*, March 8, 1924, in Pupo, *Interviste a Pirandello*, cit., p. 221. For one of the most recent treatments of this aspect of the play, and some indications about previous interpretations, see Witt, *The Search for Modern Tragedy*, cit., chapter 3, "Pirandellian Fascism, Metatragedy,

the problemi s clear: Ilse and her company come up against the challenge of making theatre for "una società efficiente e produttiva, diventata estranea al richiamo dei valori spirituali della cultura."[167] Much of the play centers on the artist's dilemma about such a situation: keep trying to reach the people, or hide away?

It's admittedly difficult to read Cotrone's line announcing that the local theatre is being torn down to build a stadium or a cinema, or his description of the giants' "scavi e fondazioni, deduzioni d'acqua per bacini montani, fabbriche, strade, colture agricole," and not think of the regime's "Battle for Grain," the draining of the Pontine Marshes and construction of the fascist new towns in their place, excavations of ancient sites and renovations of entire neighborhoods like those carried out in the capital city, and the erection of governmental palaces, housing, and stadiums. Indeed, the infamous saying about Mussolini, who "made the trains run on time" bears witness to the extent that fascism's creation, overhaul, and administration of infrastructure and public works defined the regime's activity, especially in the 1930s. The Maestro was rather suspicious towards technology, and, like Mussolini, touted the potential of the theatre to reach the masses over that of the cinema (which the regime was and has been erroneously accused of supporting at the theatre's expense),[168] so little jabs like those found in *Giganti* may well have been comments – not entirely positive – on the regime's perceived cultural agenda: certainly, the frustration of a Pirandello who continued to see his long-awaited national theatre *not* be built is glimpsed in such dialogue.

---

and Myth." As Witt points out, Italian criticism (with the exceptions of Roberto Alonge and Paolo Puppa) have identified the giants as the fascists. The most notable interpretations of the play on stage are Giorgio Strehler's three productions, of 1947, 1966, and 1994: in both the 1966 and 1994 productions, as the director had written in his notes – published in *Il Dramma*, December 1966, "I giganti siamo noi." While in 1937 and after some saw in the play a criticism of the Nazis, facilitated by Pirandello's description of the giants as big men living on the mountain above, given that the play was imagined as early as 1928, and the second act in which they are described dates to 1934, this is a largely anachronistic premise.

[167] Vicentini, *Disagio*, cit., p. 193.

[168] An issues I'll address in the conclusion.

But as it's been shown that such criticism could've just as easily been a response to modernity's unfolding both within and outside of Italy, and in light of the fact that most arguments for Pirandello's anti-fascism have been made in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, it seems worthwhile to consider the play a working-out of the broader philosophical an aesthetic questions that were of maximum importance during the *ventennio*, rather than an anti-fascist attack.[169] Certainly, the behavior of the mysterious giants is less at issue in the play than are the choices of the artist and the actions of the masses.

As regards the artist, the magician Cotrone has closed himself away: "paga la propria salvezza con la rinuncia ad operare sul mondo esterno," and as the play develops, we see the tragic ramifications of Ilse's refusal to do the same. They seem inevitable.[170] Stefano described:

> Ma Cotrone comprende che non c'è da fare colpa a nessuno di quel che è accaduto. Non è, non è che la poesia sia stata rifiutata; ma solo questo: che i poveri servi fanatici della vita, in cui oggi lo spirito non parla, ma potrà sempre parlare un giorno, hanno innocentemente rotto, come fantocci ribelli, i servi fanatici dell'Arte, che non sanno parlare agli uomini perché si sono esclusi dalla vita, non tanto poi da appagarsi soltanto dei propri sogni, anzi pretendono di imporli a chi ha altro da fare, che credere in essi.[171]

Their utter incompatibility, the inevitable inability to communicate of the elite and the masses, could be interpreted as positing the impossibility for the artist to shape the *popolo* and their culture, and therefore an argument for the impossibility of revolution.[172]

At the same time, Cotrone suggests that the spirit "potrà parlare un giorno": there is hope for the uncouth – innocent – masses. But the mission will never be accomplished, it is clear, if the "fanatics of art" don't learn to speak to them. The admonition against separatism – against aestheticism – is clear, and in this way the play not only dramatizes but also

[169] Witt has argued that seeing the play "not so much as a portrayal of the present as a visionary warning about the future." *The Search for Modern Tragedy*, cit., p. 132.
[170] The observation, as well as the immediately preceding quote belong to Simona Costa, *Luigi Pirandello*, La Nuova Italia Editrice, Firenze 1978, p. 90.
[171] Luigi Pirandello, *I giganti della montagna*, in *Quando si è qualcuno, La favola del figlio cambiato, I giganti della montagna*, Mondadori, Milano 1983, pp. 203-04.
[172] Marziano Guglielminetti, *Pirandello*, Salerno Editrice, Roma 2006, p. 340.

eulogizes the regime's revolutionary aspirations to *andare verso il popolo.* Despite Pirandello's tendency to say his work was "apolitical," the shunning of aestheticism for sociopolitical activism was consistent with his behavior as a public intellectual throughout the *ventennio*. As we've seen, he declared his choice to join the PNF as motivated by his desire to help the revolution underway. *I giganti* reveals more clearly than other works the disesteem for the masses of the LeBonian anti-democraticism of the age, but, nevertheless, even Pirandello had been open to the possibility that fascism could indeed bring about a spiritual rebirth, and that the theatre could be instrumental in this process – if only because it would be put into the hands of artists like him. It's in fact a mistake to read in his unfinished masterpiece a wholesale condemnation of the regime's designs for the performing arts, as Ilse operates with the assumption that theatre must be taken to the people and even Cotrone – who preferred not to – shared the logic of fascism's mass theatre endeavors that saw shows mounted in fields, piazzas, and archeological zones across the country: "un teatro si fa presto a metterlo sù dovunque."[173] In principle, Pirandello supported such endeavors, and Ilse's hopes give voice to those that were, or at least had been for a time, his as well.

The Maestro spoke more than once in interviews about the Italian theatre's struggles, and also about his certainty that the regime would "riconoscerà al teatro drammatico la sua altissima funzione spirituale e sociale," for the theatre was, he argued "il mezzo più diretto e certo per parlare al popolo."[174] (These words Mussolini would echo a few months later in a speech to the SIAE that launched his call for a *teatro per le masse*). The Sicilian playwright noted that new dramaturgy – pieces likes his very own *Giganti* – was too difficult to produce in Italy, thanks to stages that were too small and ill-equipped for vast conceptions and vast

[173] Pirandello, *I giganti della montagna*, in *Maschere nude,* cit., p. 1263. This is in fact what the Countess' company does: in a wide open space where the *popolo* is already gathered for the wedding banquet, they hang their curtain on an olive tree, and prepare behind it, while the crowd waits on the other side. (Here Pirandello's audience would see behind the scenes; the curtain separates the company off-stage from the performers who brave the world on its other side, a lovely literalization – and physicalization – of the play's philosophical conflict.)
[174] Interview with *L'Impero*, cit., in Pupo, *Interviste*, cit., pp. 504-09.

spaces, and for the Italian people, who were used to living life out of doors. He stressed that the OND, the fascist after-work leisure organization, could become the theatre's greatest ally, providing the opportunity for the nation's workers to attend shows at prices they could afford – and also to participate in the creation of art: "E non sarei contrario, il primo io, per dare l'esempio, ad assegnare piccole parti ai dilettanti che, sotto la guida di abili direttori di scena, potrebbe prendere la giusta via dell'arte."[175] He was optimistic for a new Italy, where now "il nostro popolo è divenuto veramente italiano," and himself became convinced that the duce – and Marta – were right: "bisogna andare verso il popolo."[176] Mussolini's efforts to bring spiritual edification to the masses through theatre redoubled in the thirties; when *I giganti della montagna* premiered in 1937, it would do so in that very context, being played outdoors in the Boboli Gardens, as part of the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino inaugurated four years prior.

The duce's response to *I giganti della montagna* was complex, but he certainly didn't see in it any sort of a-, or even anti-, fascism: to the contrary, for him the play functioned as a sort of parable championing the choice of Ilse (Pirandello) to *andare verso il popolo* against the aestheticism of Cotrone (d'Annunzio). In telling him how the play was to end, Mussolini said, Pirandello's kin "mi sembrarono come gli esecutori della sua dichiarazione di guerra al moderatismo dal quale il genitore aveva tentato di distogliere l'intera letteratura nazionale. Al silenzio che, da anni, planava su noi da Gardone, Pirandello aveva opposto la propria polemica contro l'ineluttabile da distruggere." Accordingly, he expressed his wonder at the fact that so many – fascist and anti-fascist alike – could've persisted in seeing Pirandello as an anti-revolutionary.[177]

At the same time, he recognized that the late Maestro's masterpiece was tinged with a bitter awareness of having run out of time. They had spoken about the play together, and

[175] Interview with *La Stampa*, April 21, 1934 in Pupo, *Interviste*, pp. 543-47.
[176] Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, cit., letter 360111, p. 1273.
[177] De Begnac, *Taccuni Mussoliniani*, cit., p. 362.

about the loss of spiritualism in a positivist world. For the duce, it was clear that the piece confronted this problem: it spoke of the conflict between "gli interrogative della filosofia e l'automatismo delle risposte, poche e inerti, che la tecnologia ci dà," an issue dear to the writer who was "il vero nemico della borghesia." The thought of Pirandello's battle against that bourgeois world occupied his mind in the days following the author's death:

> Il mondo doveva liberarsi del mostro. Ma come? Non doveva incominciare la battaglia nel momento, nei giorni, nel secolo, nel millennio, in cui i giganti che ci spingono, come inerti blocchi di pietra, all'abisso, potevano essere battuti al primo scontro. Il realismo tragico che ci sommerge, e di cui Pirandello aveva tentato di moderare la marcia al massacro, avrebbe, allora, potuto essere distolto dal fabbricare borghesia. Ma, adesso, aveva pensato Pirandello, non v'era più tempo per farlo.[178]

Here the duce imagined Pirandello and himself as absolutely kindred spirits: if there was a fight that united them – that united Mussolini to all the intellectuals who participated in the creation of fascist culture – this was it. It's more than possible that in this last, unfinished work, Pirandello intimated some qualms that the dictator, who knew that a new reality was only created with "l'attività dello spirito," was failing in his task. He certainly wasn't alone. But, as both were wont to see the duce as the tragic artist-hero, Mussolini was less likely to see in the play a criticism of himself than he was an indictment of the bourgeois masses who blocked him in his enterprise.

Quando si vede costruire una nuova struttura, quando i martelli battono e le betoniere girano non è il momento di chiedere al capomastro cosa pensa di Bernard Shaw...

– Mussolini

> When Benito Mussolini reads English he reads it as fast as he speaks Italian, but when he tells me to read, he says, "But please go slowly so that I can catch every syllable." / His concentration is enormous, almost tangible. "What is that?" he will ask, when he strikes a word he does not understand. This does not often happen. In fact, it occurred only three times when we were reading Bernard Shaw's "St. Joan," a play which interested him deeply.[179]

[178] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani*, cit., p. 361. Mussolini also mentions having spoken with Pirandello, in one of their last meetings, about *Enrico IV* and *I giganti*, as well as the "caduta dello spiritualismo" that plagued the era. See p. 348.

[179] "Mussolini Strives to Master English," in *New York Times*, February 17, 1929, pp. 8, 18.

This lead-in to a 1929 *New York Times* article by Mussolini's awestruck English teacher Lilian Gibson is one of the first testaments we have to the duce's interest in and admiration for the great Irish dramatist, George Bernard Shaw. That he would've had Shaw on his radar or been particularly intrigued by his work should almost be taken for granted: widely considered one of the greatest living playwrights, Shaw was also known as a Nietzschean socialist and renovator of the modern stage, for, as d'Amico had quipped in 1919, "si guarderebbe bene, superuomo qual'è, dalla volgarità di comporre una commedia ben fatta."[180] Shaw, too, had gotten his start as a socialist orator and was a great lover of music, a self-educated and self-made man (this was one of things about the duce that appealed to the dramatist, as well as to millions of Americans).[181] His chief interest was politics, and he was particularly fascinated by great leaders: Napoleon was the protagonist of his comedy *The Man of Destiny*, and the divine Julius was in his turn immortalized in *Caesar and Cleopatra*. The year Mussolini came into the world – 1883 – was the same in which a twenty-seven year old Shaw discovered Karl Marx, struggling through the British Museum's French translation of *Das Kapital*. "From that hour," he later wrote, he became "a speaker with a gospel": he was utterly converted to the socialist cause, even if he wouldn't be an orthodox Marxist on all fronts. The next year, the lanky red-headed Irishman, who had followed his mother to London nearly a decade before, joined the newly formed Fabian Society and would quickly become one of the most influential members of its executive committee.[182] Marx's daughter Eleanor introduced Shaw to the works of Henrik Ibsen, reciting Nora to his Krogstad in a

[180] Silvio d'Amico, *Cronache*, cit., I.II. p. 413.
[181] For an overview of the international response to Mussolini, see Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il duce I*, cit., chapter five. On the American perception of the self-made, genuine, and athletic man that was Mussolini, see also John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1972.
[182] Bernard Shaw, *Sixteen Self Sketches*, Constable and Co, London 1949, p. 58. Shaw was member of the socialist intellectual Fabian society, which was frequently criticized by Marxists; on this relationship, see Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw*, Limelight, New York 1985 [1947].

reading of *A Doll's House* she organized at her Bloomsburg home in 1886. (Both playwrights, incidentally, would greatly influence Margherita Sarfatti in her feminist and socialist thinking, and Shaw was an active champion of the suffragist cause in 1913 when she visited London to see the agitators in action.)[183] Ibsen's lesson that drama could be used to address social injustice engagingly and effectively would stick with Shaw, and he eventually emerged as the English-language dramatist considered by many second only to Shakespeare (though Shaw wasn't sure he deserved only second place); England was (usually) proud to claim him as its own, despite his frequent anti-English tirades.

The duce's relationship with Shaw was for the most part indirect; to tell their story is largely to report what each said of the other – and what others said each said of the other. We have an imbalance here: if both men had a tendency to monologue (Leonard and Virginia Woolf both remembered a chance encounter with Shaw in the park, who spoke to them as if they were simply "public"),[184] the playwright did a whole lot more talking than Mussolini did, and lots of it he did about the dictator. His commentary got copious attention by the press, as by the time the blackshirts rose to power, Shaw was a household name in the English-speaking world and was making strides in continental Europe, too. In 1925, he was awarded the Nobel Prize (actually given him in 1926). Such remains his stature today that it's enough to simply refer to him as GBS, like his wife Charlotte and others did. But that back then he sat with the duce on top of the world is best illustrated by what American cowboy actor Will Rogers – legend in his own right – had to say in promotion of a 1930 radio interview with the Irish-English bard: "Shaw is the most interesting and entertaining man in

[183] Tracy C Davis, *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre*, Praeger, Westport and London 1994, p.27; Philip V. Cannistraro and Brian R. Sullivan, *Il Duce's Other Woman*, William Morrow and Co, New York 1993, p. 34.
[184] A.M.Gibbs, ed., *Shaw: Interviews and Recollections*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 1990, pp. 496, 99.

the world today. He and Mussolini are pretty near a tie. You don't need to ask any questions when you meet either one of 'em: just sit still and listen."[185]

By the time the duce became Capo del governo, Shaw's red beard had gone white as he waited and waited and waited for Britain's socialist turn. As a Fabian, GBS was a reformist, rather than a revolutionary: naming themselves after the Roman general Fabius Maximus (known as "the delayer" who used attrition warfare tactics), the Fabians believed in a gradualist approach to social and political change, where democratic leaders would peacefully take into their hands the regulation of large industries and the rent of land and capital; they battled for universal health care and minimum wage. While GBS personally didn't object to private enterprise or even private wealth, that England should have worked toward State production and equal distribution of goods and capital was a matter of course. (Shaw was an early champion of the free milk in schools that later governments, most notoriously Margaret Thatcher's, would gradually abolish.) And yet, the dramatist had never denied that it was violence that would bring about change – "Parliamentary action is usually the first stage of civil war," he wrote in 1904 – and by the early 1920s he had grown ever more doubtful that the gradualist, parliamentary approach could enact drastic change.[186] He was impressed by what he saw Stalin accomplishing in the Soviet Union, and Mussolini in Italy; and he began to observe – frequently and aloud – that dictators could "get things done," whereas, he would write in 1932, "For fortyeight years I have been addressing speeches to the Fabian Society and to other assemblies in this country […] So far as I can make out, those speeches had not produced any effect whatsoever."[187]

Shaw's chief posthumous biographer Michael Holroyd has accordingly reflected that Mussolini was for the writer a highly idealized figure: someone who was fighting – and

[185] "Will Rogers puts in a boost for a coming radio program," *New York Times*, October 24, 1930.
[186] Cit. in Bentley, *Bernard Shaw*, cit., p. 8.
[187] Cit. in Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw. The Lure of Fantasy 1918-1951*, Random House, New York 1991, p. 112.

winning – in Italy the political battles he had lost in England.[188] In effect, GBS saw the dictator as the model of a modern politician. He regularly and repeatedly beat the drums in praise of him, calling him a "remarkable Statesman" and "the most responsible ruler in Europe," for there was something admirable in a dictator who takes a people "by the scruff of the neck and bullies it into order when it suffers so much from disorder that it is only too glad to be taken in hand and drilled," who "gives his orders with his own voice and not through an imaginary megaphone called 'The Voice of the Italian People,'" and who, like Napoleon and Bismarck before him, understood that "no system of government can stand for long unless they get hold of the children and can bend the sapling in the way they wish the tree to grow."[189]

During Mussolini's tenure Shaw visited Italy thrice – in '26, '27, and '29, plus a stop in Naples during a 1932 cruise – and especially after the 1926 stay in Stresa, where he hob-knobbed with fascist federal secretary of the province of Novara, Carlo Emanuele Basile, he spoke frequently and favorably of the duce, in both public and private. Though Shaw claimed to "have no enthusiasm" for the dictator, he hadn't yet seen any reason to condemn him and, to the contrary, was clearly sympathetic and swayed: as he wrote in his 1927 "Democracy as a Delusion," he believed that fascism and socialism were alike in putting the State first, and under such conditions curbing liberties was necessary. Besides, he wrote to Labor leader and Prime Minister Ramsey McDonald, people didn't need "more paper liberty and democracy, but more discipline."[190] The dramatist's persistence in complimenting the duce caused embarrassment among the Fabian set and his other interlocutors. Fabian leader Beatrice

[188] *Ivi*, pp. 106-114.
[189] See, for example, the report on Shaw's speech at his own 70th birthday party, "Shaw feted at 70, jousts in old style at all his enemies," in *New York Times*, July 27, 1926; "In Praise of Guy Fawkes," in *Platform and Pulpit*, ed. Dan H. Laurence, Hill and Wang, New York 1961, p. 246; Preface to the 1931 reprint, *Fabian Essays Forty Years Later What They Overlooked*, in Bernard Shaw, *The Complete Prefaces*, Paul Hamlyn, London 1965, p.821; "The Corruptly Educated," in George Bernard Shaw, *Everybody's Political What What*, Dodd, Mead & Company, New York 1944, p. 169.
[190] Allen Chappelow, *Shaw – The "Chucker-Out*," AMS Press, New York 1971 [1969], p. 165; the McDonald letter is cited in Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw* IV, cit., p. 144.

Webb, for instance, fretted that "[t]his strange admiration for the person who *imposes* his will on others, however ignorant and ugly and even cruel that will may be, is an obsession which has been growing on GBS,"[191] and she wasn't alone in being troubled by the seeming amorality of his judgment on the twentieth-century despots and his "selective processing of details" in their regard.[192]

This last tendency mired Shaw in scandal in 1927, when his correspondence about fascism and Mussolini with Austrian radical socialist Friedrich Adler was made public. Like so many others, Adler was disturbed by Shaw's positive appraisal and assumed that he simply didn't know about fascist atrocities and especially the Matteotti assassination. Both the *Daily News* and *The Manchester Guardian* hosted the polemics, in which GBS defended his point of view: he knew about all of it, but he didn't think the rise to power through a *coup d'état* nor a political assassination – if indeed the duce was behind it – were unique to fascism nor grounds for its dismissal by the rest of the world. "I loathe the savageries which attended the establishment of fascism," he wrote, but nonetheless argued that "our attitude toward a new regime cannot be determined by the means employed to establish it," and in any case felt quite firmly that "Some of the things Mussolini has done, and some that he is threatening to do go further in the direction of Socialism than the English Labour Party could yet venture if they were in power. They will bring him presently into serious conflict with capitalism; and it is certainly not my business nor that of any Socialist to weaken him in view of such a conflict."[193]

If Mussolini would later call the Irish playwright his "friend" – as theatre censor Zurlo reported – it's perhaps also because Shaw was proactive in his support of him, in this case

[191] Cit. in Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw* IV, cit., p. 113-14.
[192] Tracy C. Davis, *Socialist Theatre*, cit., p. 135.
[193] Shaw's letter to Adler, in response to Adler's reception of the former's January article in the *Daily News*; the correspondence and articles surrounding this discussion are now reprinted in the volume *Bernard Shaw and Fascism*, Favil Press, London 1927.

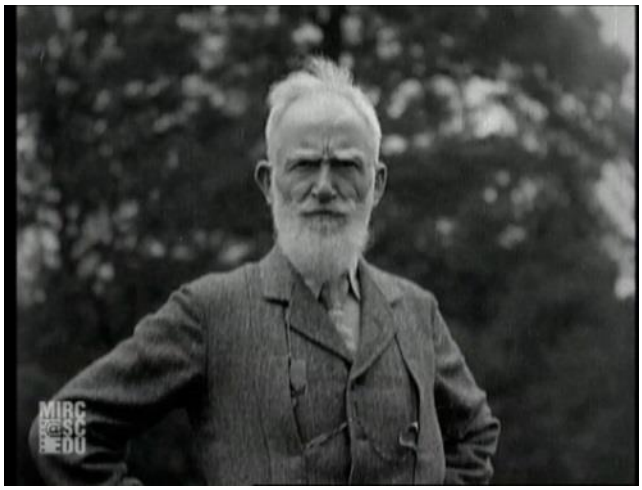
pressing to have the correspondence circulated in Italian newspapers as well.[194] He was successful, and this move brought socialist politician, historian, and exile Gaetano Salvemini – a chief organizer of the anti-fascist resistance abroad – into the polemics. He accused Shaw of total ignorance of the Italian situation ("Mr Shaw knows nothing at all about the Italy of to-day") and of "drawing all his weapons from the arsenal of Fascist propaganda": it was well known that GBS had frequented Basile in Stresa. Salvemini likewise questioned the playwright's motives in approving certain changes to his statements in their Italian versions, including a line that essentially acquitted Mussolini of any responsibility for Matteotti. Salvemini was clearly disgusted, and he took aim at Shaw by cracking, "In Mussolini he has found the man before whom his rebel spirit surrenders arms. Kate has at long last met her Petruchio." But if anyone could handle such witty sarcasm, it was Shaw, who responded point by point to Salvemini's accusations, explaining even the changes to the Italian publications with nary a drop of defensiveness, in straightforward, matter-of-fact tones (even if a scholar like Bentley would note that this was one of the few debates Shaw lost).[195]

But GBS didn't stop there. The next year, he played the provocateur in most bizarre fashion, paying homage to Mussolini on film. This was the epoch of the nascent talkie – *The Jazz Singer* had premiered in 1927 – and the Fox Movietone company, hoping to film the playwright, offered to show him how their equipment worked. He agreed to talk before the camera, and when the clip of him was released in American picture houses, it was an event indeed, as it was the first time the "indubitable charm of intonation" of Shaw's lilting brogue was heard across the pond.[196] What created a sensation, though, was his imitation of the blackshirt leader. The duce, too, had been filmed by the William Fox company, and it was in

[194] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 191.
[195] Salvemini's letters appeared on October 19 and 31 in the *Manchester Guardian*. On the polemic, see Gaetano Salvemini and Bernard Shaw, *Polemica sul fascismo*, Ideazione editrice, Roma 1997; see also Bentley, *Bernard Shaw*, cit., p. 18.
[196] Mordaunt Hall, "G. Bernard Shaw Acts in Movietone," *New York Times*, June 26, 1928. See also Blanche Patch, *Thirty Years With G.B.S.*, Dodd, Mead and Co, New York 1951, p. 155.

apparent imitation of that reel that Shaw began, suddenly appearing from the bushes in his garden, as "the Italian dictator emerged from his palatial domain in Rome with the tread of a cavalry officer and the bearing of a Napoleon."[197] A spry and jovial Shaw then had this to say:

> … But people who know me only from reading my books or sometimes from seeing my plays get a most unpleasant impression. And the people who really meet me, as you're being kind enough to meet me, and to meet me now, well, they see that I am a most harmless person. I'm quite a kindly person, you know. But still, it's not necessary for me to always look as genial as I'm trying to look now. Of course, I can put on the other thing, for instance – (*He covers his smiling face with his hands, then pulls them away, to reveal a furrowed brow and stern frown. He puts his fisted hands on his hips. Then returns to normal.*) Now that is – that is what I call my Mussolini stance. By the way, I think in justice to Signor Mussolini, I ought to tell you that he has a very wonderful head; he has a wonderful brow, which comes down to here (*placing his hands palm-down just above his eyes*). But the difficulty is that he can't take it off. Now if you watch me, I can put on that imposing look that terrifies. The Mussolini look. (*He repeats the look, and gives the Roman salute.*) Now just watch (*he briefly makes the Mussolini face, then raises his eyebrows and smiles broadly, becoming "the personification of good cheer."*[198]): I can take it off. Now, Signor Mussolini cannot take it off. He is condemned – although he is a most amiable man – he is condemned to go through life with that terrible and imposing expression, which really does a great deal of injustice to his kindly nature. But I can put it on, and I can take it off, and do all sorts of things.[199]



[197] "G. Bernard Shaw Acts in Movietone," cit.
[198] Mordaunt Hall, "G.B.S.'s Talking Shadow," *New York Times*, July 1, 1928.
[199] Fox Movietone News story 0-676, George Bernard Shaw, filmed in England, May 1928. The clip can be accessed in several online and digital disc locations. Fox originals are held at the University of South Carolina Moving Image Research Collections, Fox Movietone News Collection. Photo here retrieved from their website, http://library.sc.edu/mirc/playVideo.html?i=29.

His imitation, the *New York Times* film critic noted, was "splendid."[200] (Shaw's characterization of the Mussolini who couldn't remove his own face may, for the author, have categorized him as an actor: for the best thing about the great tragedians, from his point of view, was that they always remained themselves. But, as we've seen, this was atypical of experts in the field – for Mussolini remained himself despite efforts to appear as someone else.)[201]

Shaw's description of the duce's kindly nature almost seems to suggest that he had first-hand knowledge, but this probably wasn't yet the case: it was most likely during Shaw's return to the peninsula in the spring of 1929, when he spent a few days in Venice with Sarfatti, that he met Mussolini, too, during a stop off in Rome. About this meeting we know very little – Shaw biographers haven't evidently wanted to unearth it – but the duce himself would speak of it. That, too, under interesting circumstances: it was to Cyril Clemens, distant cousin of Mark Twain and founder of the International Society dedicated to him, that Mussolini mentioned it, while Clemens visited the duce and awarded him the Mark Twain medal in November of 1930: the dictator was, after all, honorary president of this Society. During their interview, the Capo del governo spoke about the writers he particularly enjoyed, and when Clemens mentioned that he had recently met the Irish dramatist, the duce replied: "Shaw came to see me when he was in Rome; his works have always greatly amused me." Years later, the duce's son Vittorio would proudly recount the Clemens visit, and the conversation about Shaw, as proof of the esteem held for his father; Shaw's secretary would admit that she still kept an autographed portrait of Mussolini that Shaw had received – we can only guess if it was on that occasion.[202]

---

[200] "G.B.S.'s Talking Shadow," cit.
[201] Bernard Shaw, "Acting, By One Who Does Not Believe in It," in *Platform and Pulpit,* cit., p. 16.
[202] Cyril Clemens, "A Close-Up of Il Duce," in *Overland Monthly and Out West* Magazine, June 1931, p. 13l; Vittorio Mussolini, *Mussolini e gli uomini nel suo tempo*, Ciarrapico, Roma 1977; p. 61-62; Shaw's biographers can hardly escape speaking of the author's esteem for Mussolini, but none mention the visit. Neither do they mention the time he spent with Sarfatti; her biographers, on the other hand, do, and they in fact cite

Around this time, GBS became enough of a person of interest to Mussolini to warrant his own political police file. The playwright's 1931 trip to the USSR – he had joined the Association of Friends of the Soviet Union – earned particular attention. During that visit, a long talk with Stalin had particularly energized him, and Shaw would thereafter increasingly refer to himself as a Communist. Nonetheless, even when the Comintern implemented a popular front against the growing threat of fascism in the mid-thirties, Shaw continued to back the Italian dictator, more so than his system of government. The many contradictions of the man weren't lost on d'Amico, who almost begrudgingly admitted that these contributed to the power of his *oeuvre*: "le sue stesse contraddizioni di pacifista ammiratore della violenza, di socialista ammiratore di Mussolini, di fabiano ammiratore dei Sovieti," the critic wrote, "confessano la non rara vittoria della sua umanità sulle sue teorie, la sua salutaria ma irresistibile comprensione della realtà di là dai prediletti schemi razionali."[203] GBS was hardly one to toe a party line, in other words, as a citizen or as a writer.

As will be explored in chapter four, GBS's status as a politically-minded public intellectual and the fact that Mussolini considered him a "friend" had practical ramifications for him as playwright – one frequently produced on the Italian boards. The censor had to use a fine-toothed comb in evaluating Shaw's expressly political plays, but the author merited special treatment, and Mussolini would frequently be called upon to make decisions about what to do with him. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the duce's actions during one of the worst diplomatic crises of the *ventennio*: the sanctions imposed on Italy by England and the League of Nations at the time of the Abyssinian crisis and invasion of 1935. For months leading up to the invasion in October, tensions ran high between Italy and England, as talks – also with France – failed to yield an agreement satisfactory to all sides. While the French had made it clear they wouldn't contest the duce's claims to Abyssinia, England's initial

correspondence with Shaw scholar Dan H. Laurence as one of their sources. See Cannistraro and Sullivan, *Il Duce's Other Woman*, cit., p. 617. See also Blanche Patch, *Thirty Years*, cit., p. 94.

[203] Silvio d'Amico, *Cronache*, cit., IV.I. pp. 149-152.

recognition of Italy's "right" to colonial expansion was gradually withdrawn. Essentially convinced that Britain's opposition would only come in the form of sanctions rather than counter-attack, Mussolini opted to forge ahead, provoking these sanctions – an arms and ammunition embargo, prohibition of all loans or credit, a ban on Italian imports and on exports of supplies feeding the war industry – and along with them enduring hostility. Fifty-two member states of the League imposed the punishment (not consistently, it must be said), but because they had lead the charge and then pushed for the tightening of sanctions to include resources (like petroleum) that had been left out initially, the English bore the brunt of the regime's hatred, as well as its fierce propaganda campaign in support of the colonial endeavor and against those "egotistical" enemies who wanted to "toglierci un pò di posto al sole."[204]

To these measures the dictator replied with defiant counter-sanctions of his own, which included bans on prose and opera works by authors from sanctioning nations: French production was reduced rather than prohibited outright, while English plays were cut off from the Italian stage – except for Shakespeare's and Shaw's. Certainly, this tells us what Shaw's status was in Mussolini's eyes, but the playwright was dismayed. In the duce's offices, it was learned that GBS had released a public statement saying that while he had no antipathy for Italy, he couldn't accept being regarded as anti-British; therefore, he had instructed his agents not to ask for the same exemption rewarded to the Bard – a declaration that seemed tantamount to pulling his production from Italian stages.[205] Notwithstanding his belief that he ranked right up there with Shakespeare, then, Shaw imagined that the exemption came to him for political, not artistic, reasons: he took for granted that he had received special consideration as a pro-fascist, rather than as the best (or second-best) Anglophone dramatist

[204] Thus spoke Mussolini in his address to the Italian people on the eve of the invasion, October 2, 1935. On the Abyssinian crisis and war, and the diplomatic maneuvering surrounding it, see Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il duce I*, cit., chapter six.
[205] Emanuela Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale*, cit., pp. 187-88; Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 134.

of all time. Truth be told, it wouldn't have been difficult to perceive the decision this way, since Shaw had indeed spoken out against the "useless" sanctions and, true to fashion, blamed them on English hypocrisy and myopic politicking. In a letter to *Time and Tide* magazine, he called the League of Nations "a whirlpool of the jealousies of rival imperialisms," and mocked the notion of "raising the Banner of peace," which had well nigh provoked a British and French move

> to smash the Italian Empire in the name of Peace, of Abyssinian integrity, of the League of Nations, of the plighted honor of the Powers, of the rest of the ragbag of appropriately fine phrases, and of popular dislike and fear of the resolute man, Mussolini. / Desmond [MacCarthy, whose open letter Shaw responded to] is momentarily taken in by this nonsense, and does not grasp the fact that it means simply another war more infernal than the last one, and a century of bad blood between us and a hitherto friendly Italy. When he does realize it he will rise up and give me the Fascist salute.[206]

Shaw's logic was precisely the one Mussolini was banking on: the Brits may not have been thrilled about his imperial plans, but they wouldn't want to risk the European peace over it. For GBS, the blackshirt boss was merely taking his share as the British had done: it was therefore dishonest and pointless – and dangerous even – to get up on a high horse. Certainly, if Shaw had to fear being ostracized as he was during the first world conflict for writing "Common Sense About the War," a tract considered by the English damnably anti-patriotic, it wasn't only for the duce's exemption from the theatrical counter-sanctions, but thanks to his own heretical straight shooting.

It might be tempting to see the ban as a kind of infantile gesture – the child who sticks a tongue out at the parent who sends him to his room – or to find it significant only on the level of propaganda, as Renzo de Felice did.[207] But Shaw's gravity in response to it stands as a reminder that the theatre was an integral part of the conducting of State business. No one better than this playwright has taught us that the stage could serve as political pulpit.

[206] Quoted in Chappellow,, *The Chucker-Out*, cit., p. 391. Shaw gained some unfavorable press in the U.S. for this, as evidenced by an article, "Shaw and Mussolini" in *New Masses*, October 29, 1935. HI: Freeman, b72.
[207] Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il duce I.*, cit., p. 764.

However, it was also, very practically speaking, a livelihood for writers, publishers, actors, producers, etc. For someone like Shaw, falling out of favor with an audience or being removed from the stage meant being deprived of his daily bread but also of his soapbox: the only reason for writing plays, as far as he was concerned. What's more, because he was quite popular on the Italian stage, producers and companies stood to lose if his works were to disappear from their repertory, a point underscored by a letter from Shaw's Italian translator Cesare Castelli, who mentioned to Zurlo just a month after the sanctions went into effect that if he were to deny the performance visa for the new comedy *The Millionairess*, it would spell bad news for the actress Paola Borboni and her company, "che purtroppo non hanno altre buone novità per migliorare i magri incassi."[208] The choice to inflict counter-sanctions – and to exempt Shaw from them – had repercussions far beyond the symbolic, and this Mussolini knew full well.

GBS did, too, of course, and if he was careful not to create too many troubles for himself at home, he also took steps to keep his "friendship" with Mussolini intact. Sending in the script of *The Millionairess* to Zurlo, Castelli took the opportunity to clarify "una voce falsa o esagerata" that reported the author's pulling his works from the repertory: "Si tratta di una malignità o di un grosso equivoco," he explained, and insisted that Shaw wished any and all current or potential contracts to go forward. The only exception to this was his *Too True to Be Good* – which, as we'll see in the chapter on censorship, Mussolini himself found too problematic to approve. Shaw, too, had come around to recognize "la poca opportunità in questo momento" and so followed the duce's lead.[209]

Despite the twenty-seven years he had on the Capo del governo, Shaw would outlive him, battling to the ripe old age of ninety-four and dying in 1950. The last dozen or so years of his life bear no traces of further exchange between them, nor do more comments by the

[208] ACS MCP UCT f16b262, letter dated 28 December 1935.
[209] ACS MCP UCT f16b262, letter dated 17 December 1935.

duce emerge. GBS, on the other hand, would continue to reflect on Musso, as he sometimes called him, and, in part, recast some of his earlier thinking. He was taken enough with the duce to immortalize him as Bombardone – "dominant, brusque, every inch a man of destiny" – in his satire *Geneva*: a satire, however, where Shaw admitted that both Mussolini and Hitler, who became Ernest Battler, got off fairly well. (Indeed, he had commented, "I hope they like it.")[210] His rethinking applied on many fronts, but in general terms applied to the fascist system, rather than to its leader: Hitler's anti-Semitic campaign was notoriously anathema to Shaw (even if he had said some horrible things about Jews), and he couldn't have appreciated the duce's alliance with the Nazis; if fascism had first seemed like socialism's advance, over time the Irish dramatist came to see it as merely "the latest mask of capitalism," and in fact predicted that of the fascists "it shall be said that they filled the overfed with good things, and the poor they sent away empty."[211] He would still rail against the inefficacy and hypocritical self-righteousness of British politicians and their parliamentary system, but he came to acknowledge that perhaps dictators weren't all they were cracked up to be, either. On Socialist grounds, democracy was a failure, he wrote in his 1944 *Everybody's Political What What*: "Liberty and Democracy mean nothing to the citizen who has no leisure. Where 90% of the people have all the work and no leisure, and 10% all the leisure and no work (or thereabouts), Liberty is a will-o'-the-wisp."[212] At the same time, he admitted that dictatorships brought with them problems of their own, and finally came to a strong conclusion: "There is no hope for civilization in government by idolized single

[210] *Geneva. Another Political Extravaganza* in Bernard Shaw, *The Complete Plays*, Paul Hamlyn, London 1965, p. 1316. See also Warren Sylvester Smith, *Bishop of Everywhere: Bernard Shaw and the Life Force*, Penn State University Press, University Park 1982, p. 143.
[211] Bernard Shaw, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism, and Fascism*, ed. Frances Hickson and Dan H. Laurence, Penguin, New York 1982 [1937], pp. 487, 492.
[212] Bernard Shaw, *Everybody's Political What What*, cit., p. 351.

individuals."[213] By the time 1944 came 'round, he had seen what the cult of Mussolini, with his "very wonderful head," had brought down on Italians – and the rest of Europe.

*

Although Mussolini's statements were too few and too general for us to know exactly what there was in Shaw that appealed to him, the possibilities are so numerous that the more pertinent question – an almost rhetorical one – becomes, "What wasn't to like?" (The non-rhetorical aspect of this query will be addressed in the censorship chapter.) We know that the duce was intrigued by *Saint Joan*; we know, too, that Shaw amused him; we know thanks to the interviews with Ludwig that he put GBS with Pirandello and d'Annunzio among the moderns he liked best: "Ammiro Shaw," he said, but then confessed that "talora mi infastidisce lo sforzo di originalità."[214] (In this he wasn't alone.) Mussolini liked tragedy, history, and comedy. Shaw specialized in the latter two; he was indeed a comic genius. Like the duce, as noted, he wrote plays about Napoleon and Caesar, and though he wouldn't join him in writing on Cavour, he did name one of his *Heartbreak House* characters Mazzini. GBS was irreverent and heretical; he had a splendid way with words and a special knack for sending up that particularly suffocating brand of bourgeois morality that was Victorian England's. (He went much further than the duce ever could've in his critique of bourgeois institutions like marriage.) He even had a strain that we can anachronistically call "futurist," for he delighted in putting a speeding car on stage already in his 1903 Don Giovanni play, *Man and Superman*, a piece that also depicted male flight from the clutches of the seemingly sentimental woman who would keep him from revolution. (As we'll see, Shaw was apt to sympathize for the type of unconventional, warrior women that the duce prized in Schiller.) But if Mussolini put Shaw up there with d'Annunzio and Pirandello, it was almost certainly

[213] *Ivi*, p. 340.
[214] Ludwig, *Colloqui*, cit., p. 203.

because in his work predominated the themes we've already traced in theirs: the moment of action, the struggles of great leaders, the coming of the Superman.

At first glance, the duce's theatrical triumvirate seems odd: d'Annunzio and Pirandello were practically enemies, and though the texts of the Vate and the Irish bard both simply overflowed with words, it's hard to imagine something further from the former's ritual and pageantry than the latter's drawing room romps. (Pirandello and Shaw from this point of view seems a bit more akin, and it's in fact worth noting that GBS had quite a hand in promoting Pirandello in Britain and America.) And yet, looking back, in 1953, Alvaro made an observation that underscores an affinity particularly applicable to our discussion here:

> La ricerca è di una nuova moralità, dell'autonomia dell'individuo fuori della morale comune. È il dramma degli appetiti e della forza di osare fuori delle regole e delle convenzioni […]-Da una parte esiste questo eroe scatenato che sembra poter fare a meno di una morale religiosa e sfidare la società; dall'altro esiste la onorabilità propria e della famiglia, i figli, la moglie, la madre. Come si orienterà l'eroe moderno in un mondo simile, in cui pare possa osare tutto, per rimanere, in definitiva, sconfitti? E sono sconfitti i forti, non i deboli. / Ibsen inizia il ciclo, Pirandello lo chiude. […] In mezzo c'è la reazione del super-uomo di d'Annunzio e di Shaw…[215]

In the terms of theatrical criticism, what Alvaro describes is the "problem play" – those dramas that took up contentious contemporary social issues, and, certainly Ibsen and Shaw were the most renowned experts of the form. In Shaw's case, said problems didn't merely spark the conflict of the story, but also provided focus for explicit (and often lengthy) onstage debates.

Though GBS was often criticized on this precise point, we might surmise that here his tastes and temperament coincided with those of the Capo del governo, in that we've seen how the duce was drawn to the works – theatrical and non – that helped him think through his own experiences and concerns. But as a writer, as a playwright, his impulses were much like

[215] Corrado Alvaro, *Cronache e scritti teatrali*, cit., pp. 466-67.

Shaw's: in his younger years, he had worked on just this sort of play. *La lampada senza luce* was a social drama "nel senso di Zola" about a poor, blind child; *La lotta dei motori*, on the other hand, about the theft of factory secrets, staged the conflict between labor and capital. In these works, he said, "volevo ordinare le mie idee. Perciò è più importante che siano state abbozzate che non compiute."[216] What Mussolini appreciated in the theatre was its educative and edifying function: on this he and Shaw saw perfectly eye-to-eye.

Again, however, what ties Shaw not just to contemporaries like Pirandello and d'Annunzio but also to the duce was his interest in politics and great leaders, and even more specifically in the new man. As had happened to d'Annunzio, not everyone looked upon this aspect of GBS' work favorably; his biographer and friendly sparring partner G.K. Chesterton, for instance, lamented, "But it is certainly a nuisance that the one Nietzsche doctrine which attracted him was not the one Nietzsche doctrine that is human and rectifying. [… Nietzsche] only succeeded in putting into his head a new superstition, […] the Superman."[217] GBS' plays, moreover, are so overpopulated with renditions of the Superman – great men, vital geniuses male or female, "born bosses" – that one scholar commented, "in the hundreds of characters that Shaw created, there is not one perfect Superman – only a brilliant series of approximations. There are artists, philosophers, teachers, warriors, saints and bosses, all falling short of the idea and yet certainly Supermen when compared with the rest of their society."[218] True enough: for Shaw knew as Mussolini did and Nietzsche had seen before them, the great being was yet to come.

This was, in fact, the central theme of *Man and Superman*: Shaw ruminated on it in both the play and its preface. The protagonist is Jack (John) Tanner, author of the *Revolutionist's Handbook* and modern British descendent of Don Juan (who appears in the

[216] Emil Ludwig, *Colloqui con Mussolini*, pp. 201-02.
[217] G.K. Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw*, The Echo Library, Middlesex 2008, p. 73; Chesterton, however, was more contemptuous of Nietzsche than he was of the duce.
[218] Charles Scott, "Genus, Superman; Species, Multiform," in *Educational Theatre Journal* 12.4 (Dec 1960): pp. 283-94, 293.

lengthy third-act dream sequence that GBS called "totally extraneous"[219]); he spends the play trying to flee the young woman who has her sights set on him, Ann Wakefield, but in the end gives up all resistance: the life force overpowers him, and he will marry her. They will procreate. As we learn from the dream – where Jack appears as Don Juan and Ann becomes Doña Ana – the goal of their union is the breeding of a Superman: when Juan decides to leave hell for heaven, where the "masters of reality" live, Ana follows him, for she learns about Nietzsche's concept and understands that it is her quest "to find a father for the Superman!"[220]

Several of Shaw's ideas, dispersed throughout various writings, come together to comprise his notion of the Superman, which he acknowledged was heavily indebted not just to Nietzsche but also to Schopenhauer (scholars have identified his "life force" as a cross between Schopenhauer's will to live and Bergson's *élan vital*). At the core of his vision were "metaphysical self-realization" and the very life force that would – GBS dreamed – give rise to the Superman. The need for him, Shaw had Tanner explain in *The Revolutionist's Handbook,* "is a political one."[221] But just one wasn't enough: what Shaw hoped for was an entire race of Supermen: "Until there is an England in which every man is a Cromwell, a France in which every man is a Napoleon, a Rome in which every man is a Caesar, a Germany in which every man is a Luther plus a Goethe, the world will be no more improved by its heroes than a Brixton villa is improved by the pyramid of Cheops."[222] One reaches metaphysical self-realization when she overcomes her (socially-conditioned) ideals and instead discovers and achieves her own will; she is secure in and pleased with her choices and confident in the possibility of moving happily forward in life. For Shaw, because self-realization meant overcoming the default conservatism and conventionality of Victorian

[219] Preface to *Man and Superman,* in *The Complete Prefaces,* cit., p. 154.
[220] Shaw, *Man and Superman,* in *The Complete Plays,* cit., p. 389.
[221] "The Revolutionist's Handbook," in Bernard Shaw, *The Complete Prefaces,* cit., p. 174.
[222] *Ibidem.*

society, self-realization went hand in hand with social change; the Superman capable of bringing about change, accordingly, had to be a self-realized individual. It stands to reason that GBS specialized in the problem play, for the process of self-realization happened through social conflict, and, indeed, Nietzsche's Zarathustra had preached against the herd and against the "last man," who, in fear and complacence, lived a life of mediocrity.[223] In Shaw's utopic ideal, the Superman would bring about the Fabian's emotionally-grounded social justice (socialism).[224] In this, Shaw is exemplary proof of Mussolini's contention that the German philosopher had provided artists of the epoch with a grounding attitude that was at once moral and political.

If Shaw wasn't always so explicit about the Superman, however, as mentioned, his plays were full of model characters who, if they couldn't yet be considered Supermen themselves, were great enough to share some of his characteristics – and his struggles. Shavian scholars have rightly noted that he frequently depicted mentor-pupil relationships in his plays,[225] but in these there was something more; as Mussolini had observed in his own writing on the Superman, this figure would lead by example. Two of Shaw's best-liked plays, *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898) and *Pygmalion* (1912), are centered on such a process. The choice of Pygmalion as a title for the latter underscores the extent to which Shaw was interested not just in the personal relationship between the characters in question, but the function of the Pygmalion figure, as he who shapes and brings to life another being.

Pygmalion premiered in Vienna in 1913 and ran for 118 nights in London when it opened, starring Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the next year; it has become one of Shaw's best known plays, also thanks to its adaptation into the Lerner and Loewe musical *My Fair Lady*, whose 1964 award-winning film starred Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison and was directed

[223] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Macmillan, New York 2011.
[224] Gibbs, *Interviews and Reflections,* cit., p. 354; On metaphysical self-realization, see Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1913 and "Acting, by one who does not believe in it," cit.
[225] Stanley Weintraub, *The Unexpected Shaw. Biographical Approaches to G.B.S. and His Work*, Frederick Ungar, New York 1982, p. 117.

by George Cukor. But even much earlier, the play had garnered great success and generated adaptations; the 1938 film version – whose screenplay was written by GBS himself – was nominated for the best foreign film *Coppa Mussolini* at the Venice Film festival: it lost to Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*. Shaw's Pygmalion is Henry Higgins, linguistics expert, who makes a bet with colleague Colonel Pickering that he can transform a Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, into a proper English lady by teaching her to speak a more genteel English and pass her off as a Duchess at a high-society garden party. He wins his bet, and in the process grows quite fond of Eliza, despite his consistently boorish treatment of her. (If Higgins taught by example, it was in his speech, but not his manners, that he did it.) To counteract the numerous attempts to give the play "a happy ending" – where the two are understood to have fallen in love and might wind up together – Shaw wrote a long epilogue in which he explained precisely why this could never be the case. The play was, indeed, a commentary on Britain's harshly classist system and on the plight of women: for Shaw, Galatea had to win independence from Pygmalion. (Many adapters ignored his protests.)

But Higgins' quest is no frivolity, nor is his goal really even one of social elevation for Eliza: he isn't just setting out to teach a woman to speak better, but to fundamentally transform her being – her soul. In this he is one of Shaw's many artist-heroes and in this a potential Superman. Jack Tanner describes the artist as one whose "work is to shew us ourselves as we really are. Our minds are nothing but this knowledge of ourselves and he who adds a jot to such knowledge creates new mind as any woman creates new men."[226] In Shavian terms rather than Tannerian terms, then, we might conceive of Higgins' task as that of leading Eliza to her own self-realization – even if the Professor sees the "new" Eliza as his own creation rather than her innate self fully flourished. But that Higgins worked as a LeBonian sculptor might have is highlighted not only by the numerous references to him as a

[226] Shaw, *Man and Superman*, cit., p. 341.

poet, preacher, or artist, but also by his own admission, when he tells his mother that with Eliza he's been "watching her lips and her teeth and her tongue, not to mention her soul […]"[227] In other words, he is an artist, but like the Pygmalion Shaw named him for, he was interested not just in the work of art, but in creating life itself.[228]

Shaw's Caesar is another mentor, whose object of transformation is a very young Cleopatra, whom the Roman dictator aims to turn into a real queen. Much has been made of Shaw's "ironic" vision of the great leader, who is cowed by his own aging – and balding head. His apparent simplicity was acutely perceived by Italian critics when the play arrived on the peninsula after some twenty years. An enthusiastic Gramsci judged this Caesar "visto proprio umanamente, senza sublimazioni tragiche, ma ugualmente grande nella sua attività, come fu veramente" and Emma Gramatica's 1919 production of his story "degno di essere veduto e riveduto."[229] D'Amico theorized that Caesar's common, anti-heroic "buon senso" was a characteristic of the best Shavian heroes, including Saint Joan, whereas Simoni suggested that as depicted the Roman dictator was "più uomo che superuomo."[230] Nevertheless, d'Amico would have the last word, reviewing another production in 1951 and declaring that Shaw's image wasn't any sort of deflation of the general, but instead a "convincente apologia."[231] This stands to reason. Shaw's main source for his depiction of Caesar was Theodor Mommsen's famous history; his was a rather flattering portrait, but also one that hoped to remove the ancient from the pedestal upon which he'd been placed, and Shaw's image of the Roman was no less enamored.

---

[227] Shaw, *Pygmalion*, in *The Complete Plays*, cit., p. 733.
[228] Elsie B. Adams, *Shaw and the Aesthetes*, The Ohio State University Press, Columbus 1971. See in particular the chapter entitled "The Artist-Creator of Life."
[229] Antonio Gramsci, "'Cesare e Cleopatra' di G. B. Shaw," in *Cronache teatrali 1915-1920*, Torino, Aragno 2010, pp. 401-02.
[230] Renato Simoni, *Trent'anni di Cronaca Drammatica*, ILTE, Torino 1952-60, I., p. 297.
[231] Several productions of the play were reviewed over the years; citations come from Silvio d'Amico, *Cronache*, cit. III.I. pp. 222-25; in the 1951 review (V.II. pp. 464-66). D'Amico contrasted his opinion to those fascists who had obtusely believed otherwise, suggesting that the censors had banned the play; but this wasn't exactly the case, as shall be discussed in the censorship chapter.

GBS himself had spoken explicitly about the anti-heroic hero, arguing that "credible" heroes were what audiences desired. "The old demand for the incredible, the impossible, the superhuman […] has fallen off; and the demand now is for heroes in whom we can recognize our own humanity," he wrote. His Caesar was humanized and real – like true heroes, he touched "the summits only at rare moments."[232] For Shaw, there was no question that Caesar was great, and even more so off the battlefield then on, and he not surprisingly gave much space in his drama to "domestic" scenes, though carefully avoiding the love story with a very young Cleopatra. Caesar's greatness is shown is his stern yet indulgent guiding of the young girl he transforms into a queen as Higgins transformed Eliza into a duchess. Biographer St. John Ervine contended that – regardless of the historical authenticity of Shaw's story – the character was above all "Shaw's conception of a great man": "He drew the picture of a genius as he conceived a genius to be, and for purpose of convenience called it a portrait of Julius Caesar."[233] Nowhere else are his intentions confirmed, perhaps, in the young Egyptian beauty's calling him "a god."[234]

If Caesar's normality didn't tarnish his greatness, nor did his Nietzschean spirit disappear. Shaw scholar Stanley Weintraub argues:

> In developing his realist hero in the person of Caesar, Shaw actually destroyed the traditional superman-hero only to build upon his still-warm grave a more restrained variety, but no less superman. In addition to Mommsen, he may have recalled – as did his biographer Henderson – Nietzsche's criteria of the great man: "Not to be able to take seriously, for a long time, an enemy, or a misfortune, or even one's own misdeeds – is the characteristic of strong and full natures, abundantly endowed with plastic, formative, restorative, also obliterative force."[235]

A daring and eloquent man of action, the level-headed, quick-thinking, and clement Caesar created – or adopted – by GBS, as one scholar put it, "believes principally in the internal

[232] Cited in Weintraub, *Unexpected*, cit. p. 119.
[233] St John Ervine, cit. in Weintraub, *Unexpected*, cit., p. 112.
[234] Shaw, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, in *The Complete Plays*, cit., p. 289.
[235] Weintraub, *Unexpected*, p. 119.

conquest which means the victory of will over passions."[236] Responding to every catastrophe and betrayal that befalls him with cool and prescient wisdom, Caesar maintain control of the situation as Alexandria burns to the ground around him. Like Shaw's other Supermen figures, he is a born leader and a "genius-realist," balancing his passions with reason and acting with a perfect blend of instinct and intellect.[237] Most interesting about Shaw's conception, in light of Mussolini's commentary, was the effort he made to give his protagonist "originality" – which, he wrote, "gives a man an air of frankness, generosity, and magnanimity, enabling him to estimate the value of truth, money, or success, quite independently of convention and moral generalization."[238] If the duce seems to have meant that he didn't much appreciate Shaw's attempts to demonstrate his own originality in plays that are the same, we can take GBS' statements here as revelatory of his own self-conception: Shaw, in any case, had never hid the fact that he considered himself a great man.

D'Amico saw "buon senso" as one of the things that linked Shaw's Caesar and Joan of Arc; "originality" is another. Joan is one of Shaw's most delicious characters. She isn't humble – she doesn't see the need for it, as she is relaying God's will, not her own – but she is as gracious as she is tenacious. Ingenuously forthright and self-assured, she has no doubts about her mission and won't take no for an answer from anyone who stands in her way. Until the end of the play, she rarely needs to, for the Maid of Orléans has an overpowering charisma that puts all protests to rest. She is the quintessential "born boss" that Shaw spoke of, for while her guiding the French army against the English is inevitable, she – as a young woman – is also of course the most unlikely candidate for such a task. *Saint Joan*, written in 1920 on the occasion of the martyr's belated canonization by the Catholic Church, chronicles Joan's victory and utter defeat in six scenes spanning from the lead-in to the siege at Orléans

[236] Kashi Kumar Karan, *Bernard Shaw and the Concept of the Superman*, Vanni Prakashan, New Dehli 1989, p. 54.
[237] Karan, *Bernard Shaw and the Concept of the Superman*, cit., p. 114.
[238] Weintraub, *Unexpected*, cit., p. 113.

to her burning at the stake, plus an epilogue that jumps forward twenty-five years, to when Joan was cleared of heresy in 1456. In that scene, King Charles dreams of Joan and her former adversaries – who all appear on stage – and an emissary from 1920, who relays the news of her canonization. Joan's originality, her utter uniqueness, is evident throughout the play and driven home in the piece's final line: Joan's pained, "Oh God, that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive They saints? How long, O Lord, how long?"[239]

While a certain diffidence in the piece toward the Church would've whetted the appetite of the duce *mangiapreti*, it is also true that the play's concerns were political – not religious – and this would've made it all the more enticing. However, when reflecting on Mussolini's deep interest in the play, as testified to by his English instructor, it's difficult not to think about it in relation to the "superfemmine" we've already come across and, even more so, to the women of *Wilhelm Tell* (GBS' Joan is more like Schiller's other heroic women than Schiller's own Joan is: she abandons her cause for love of an English soldier).[240] Though she is a mere "slip of a girl," the French troops – or at least a part of them – follow Shaw's Joan even when in contradiction to the orders of their superiors. Her charisma is established in the play's first scene, when Captain Robert De Budricourt's steward tells him that no one has followed through on his orders to throw out Joan, who has been waiting for two days to speak to him. When he asks why, and if they are afraid of her, the steward merely explains, "She is so positive, sir." In response to the repeated accusation that the men are afraid, he says, "No, sir: we are afraid of you; but she puts courage into us." Joan, moreover, "really doesn't seem to be afraid of anything."[241]

[239] Shaw, *Saint Joan*, in *The Complete Plays*, cit., p. 1009.
[240] See Frederick S. Boas, "Joan of Arc in Shakespeare, Schiller, and Shaw," in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2.1 (1951), pp. 35-45.
[241] Shaw, *Saint Joan*, cit., p. 964. It should be noted that Shaw never used apostrophes for contractions, but for uniformity's sake, I keep them here.

Accordingly, the Maid plays Gertrude to the Dauphin's Stauffacher, convincing the future King Charles to give her control of the army to raise the siege at Orléans and bucking him up to the courage he doesn't have. There's a hint of Higgins in her, too; she will not only literally crown Charles King in the Cathedral at Rheims (as the voices from God that come to her via Saints Catherine and Margaret command), but hopes to make him sovereign in spirit as well, as a series of her words to him show. "I shall put courage into thee," she tells him (he doesn't want it); "There is some good in thee, Charlie; but it is not yet a King's good," she observes ("We shall see," he retorts); "Thou must fight Charlie, whether thou will or no," and "I can turn thee into a King, in Rheims Cathedral; and that is a miracle that will take some doing, it seems." When the Dauphin, too, succumbs to her persuasion, they call the others in to tell them the news; the timid soon-to-be- monarch pleads, "Mind you stand by and don't let me be bullied."[242]

If the play is more attuned to political conflict than religious questions, it also shares with *Tell* a class thematic that the duce surely would've enjoyed. Joan knows full well that her humble origins – and consequent lack of pretension and will to act – are a large part of her appeal, and sees in other simple folk her same bravery and drive. His "knights are no good for real fighting," she tells Commander Dunois, because

> War is only a game to them, like tennis and all their other games: they make rules as to what is fair and what is not fair, and heap armor on themselves and on their poor horses to keep out the arrows; and when they fall they cant get up, and have to wait for their squires to come and lift them to arrange about the ransom with the man that has poked them off their horse. […] Common folk […] cannot afford armor and cannot pay ransoms; but they follow me half naked into the moat and up the ladder and over the wall. With them it is my life or thine, and God defend the right! You may shake your head, […] but remember the day your knights and captains refused to follow me to attack the English at Orleans! You locked the gates to keep me in; and it was the townsfolk and the common people that followed me, and forced the gate, and showed you the way to fight in earnest.[243]

[242] *Ivi*, pp. 974-75.
[243] *Ivi*, p. 988.

At the end of the scene, Joan presses on for another battle: she abruptly walks out on a long discussion knowing full well that she may end up at the stake, leaving the others to look on in chagrin after her. It's a moment reminiscent of the climax of *Tell,* even if far less dramatic; as the Governor sits majestically on his horse, Tell suddenly lets his arrow go, taking advantage of the moment, taking action, and shooting him through, while all the others discuss. Knowing her death will result, all the others wish she wouldn't act, but either "keep quiet, or go home!"[244] But Joan's will takes precedence over all.

The fact that it is indeed Joan's will – not God's, as she claims – that brings about the play's tragic conclusion is a key interpretative point. As scholars have convincingly demonstrated, despite the chronicle structure and the epilogue delivering the news of Joan's posthumous triumph in canonization (both of which make it seem more "history play" than something else), the drama can be – nay, ought to be – read as a tragedy, which of course centers on the maid's experience and, ultimately, her tragic fall from a hero's grace. Shaw went to some lengths to make it clear that Joan was a "free agent," following the voices she claimed came from God but were really the expression of her own desire.[245] Likewise, he even put into the mouths of another character the steadfast declaration that the maid was a tragic hero: it was her "hubris," her insistence that "she knows better than everyone else," to lead her to the fiery pit.[246] In her life – and by her death – she was one of the *sconfitti* Alvaro referred to.

As we've seen, the struggle, and even the ultimate defeat, of the superman attracted Mussolini: the fight was more important than the victory, at least when it came to drama. *Saint Joan* suddenly appears in its concerns quite close to a piece like d'Annunzio's *Gloria*, in fact, if one scholar is correct that the tragedy turns on Shaw's "most incessant aspiration, the reforming of man as a political animal," and the playwright's reflection on the "real

[244] *Ivi*, p. 990.
[245] John Fielden, "Shaw's *Saint Joan* as Tragedy," in *Twentieth Century Literature,* 3.2. (1957), pp. 59-67, 63.
[246] Shaw, *Saint Joan,* cit., p. 987.

sorrow of great men," which is "when they realize that those about them are 'incapable of dealing with the problems raised by their civilization,'"[247] Joan's final line – that mournful "How long, O Lord, how long?" – confirms this reading. Joan was something out of the ordinary, and Shaw's dreamed-of race of supermen was yet to come.

Fascist criticism of the great Irish playwright pivoted around familiar themes as well. Writing for Bottai's journal, philosopher Lorenzo Giusso used Shaw's obsession with the superman to refute claims that he was "un esacrabile negatore." It was true that there was a destructive bent in his work, but to reduce it to such – as so many "miopi lettori inglesi" did – was quite simply an act of bad faith, the bombastic article argued. Focusing in the main on *Back to Methuselah*, a play that advances Shaw's ideas in creative evolution and the belief that longevity was the way to the improvement of the individual and hence society, Giusso rightly identified the inspiration of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Bergson, Wagner, and Ibsen, and characterized GBS' evolutionary notions as spiritual, vitalist, and dynamic. He claimed that such interests took Shaw away from socialism, which was materialist – evidently writing a pro-Shaw article in *Critica fascista* required such an argument – but instead acknowledged that the dramatist's doctrine "vuole essere il principio di una rivoluzione religiosa e morale e vuole irradiarsi in una fede sociale." For Giusso, Shaw had given up on that rosy idea of progress: "il suo sogno d'una umanità di titani va oltre," he noted, pointing out that Shaw was after nations of Supermen, not just one.

It can't escape the reader's notice, then, how consistent – even rather dully so – fascist criticism on drama of the epoch came to be. We've already read how such discourse shaped analyses of Pirandello's fascism or lack thereof, and we'll see further on how the same questions would return for the next generation of playwrights. Shaw's dreams may have been

[247] Katherine Haynes Gatch, "The Real Sorrow of Great Men; Mr. Bernard Shaw's Sense of Tragedy" in *College English* 8.5 (1947), pp. 233-34. Here Gatch cites Shaw's preface to *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*.

utopian, Giusso claimed, but at least his religion of the superman was "un atto di fede."[248] Not only was Shaw Mussolini's "friend," but it was possible – easy – to locate him among those great men who championed, along with the duce, a so-called new faith and new tomorrow.

The Allies of the Good Old Days: Clamoring for Revolution, Imagining Reconstruction

Several friends and colleagues from Mussolini's pre-fascist revolutionary days, all playwrights, could claim a place in this story. There was Rino Alessi, the future duce's classmate in Forlimpopoli, who would gain some notoriety as a playwright, and not shy from asking his old friend for production support from time to time. There are the futurists Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Emilio Settimelli, companions in the fight for intervention in the Great War, and early, enthusiastic proponents not just of the ways of the future – of technology, machines – and of purifying war, but of the fusion of politics and art that would likewise influence Mussolini's conception of fascism. And there was some Sem Benelli: a playwright of certain fame, who Mussolini didn't much esteem. But at a certain point, politically speaking, they were aligned, and Benelli was to appear on the duce's list of senators. But he abandoned the cause in 1924, and for this reason would be hated by a number of *gerarchi* for the rest of his days. He assumed Mussolini was out to get him; the duce, though, often had bigger fish to fry. (Still, Benelli's case is an interesting one, and he'll appear elsewhere in this study.) But it is of Bontempelli we find more to say when it comes to Mussolini the critic: the duce and this writer came into frequent contact, for the latter was ambitious, and never tired of searching for ways to foster the would-be revolution; but most importantly, it was of Bontempelli the duce spoke quite often, not just as an old mate, but as a key contributor to his cultural project.

[248] "Shaw e il superuomo," in *Critica fascista* V.22 (15 November 1927), pp. 432-33.

***"Bontempelli va letto e va ascoltato. È, forse, la voce più moderna dell'intellettualità italiana.*"**

- Mussolini

Massimo Bontempelli was an ardent fascist and enthusiastic *mussoliniano*. An interventionist and founding member of Marinetti's Futurist Political Party, Bontempelli, who was born in Como but had spent his life moving about Italy – first as the son of a railroad engineer, then as a schoolteacher, then as a writer – made the duce's acquaintance in Milan, where he was a regular attendee of Sarfatti's salon after the Great War and a contributor to *Ardita* from its very first issue.[249] A literary luminary on the rise at home and abroad, in 1926 he launched a movement called Novecento (twentieth century), championing it as fascist art *par excellence*; he served as secretary of the fascist writer's union, was a member of the Royal Academy, traveled to Argentina with Pirandello as a cultural emissary, and was a vocal supporter of fascist culture ventures, writing paeans to Mussolini's newly-designed Via del Impero in Rome, touting his backing of the Teatro degli Undici, and championing his call for a theatre of the masses. His esteem for Mussolini he voiced in epigrammatic fashion, calling him a "Machiavelli garibaldino," and dedicating a copy of one of his books "al Duce velocissimo."[250] Such was Bontempelli's reputation as a devotee, non-sympathizers joked that he was born in 1883, like Mussolini, not in 1878.[251]

The admiration was mutual. With De Begnac, Mussolini noted that he always wound up talking about the same restricted group of intellectuals and academicians, and Bontempelli was one of them. Not only was he to be read and listened to, as one of Italian letters' most modern voices, but for the duce was "tra i più dotati prosatori del secolo," the "analizzatore più avveduto della profonda coscienza dell'italiano di sempre": with men like Bontempelli

[249] On Bontempelli's friendship with Sarfatti, which dates back to at least 1917 and which they retained even after she returned to Italy in 1947, see Cannistraro and Sullivan, *Il Duce's Other Woman*, cit.
[250] Interview with Luigi Freddi, in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, April 1925, GRI Massimo Bontempelli papers b. 63. The dedicated page, detached from the book it belonged to, is conserved at the ACS SPD CO 209.
[251] Corrado Alvaro, Nino Frank, and Massimo Bontempelli, *Lettere a "900,"* ed. Marinella Mascia Galateria, Bulzoni, Roma 1985), p. 111.

among its ranks, the Academy could be "sicuri del prestigio di cui ha diritto di dichiararsi titolare." The duce particularly admired his writing style – "La prosa di Bontempelli incanta. È realmente un dono. Tutto viene condensato nel minimo di parole usuali," he said – and found his 1937 text, "Pirandello, o del candore," spoken in commemoration of the Maestro's death, "forse tra i migliori capitoli di critica letteraria da De Sanctis a Serra."[252] (The piece truly is a beautifully heartfelt and incisive consideration of Pirandello the man and his *oeuvre*, for Bontempelli was an astute critic, and the Sicilian author was one of his closest friends.)

What Mussolini thought of Bontempelli as a playwright, we don't know. But Bontempelli was a man of the theatre in the fullest sense. He was a critic between '20-'22 and forever a theorist, in addition to having written fourteen published and produced plays. The premiere of his *Siepe a nordovest* inaugurated Anton Giulio Bragaglia's renowned avant-garde Teatro degli indipendenti in 1923. He was one of Pirandello's most important collaborators in the Teatro degli Undici affair: the one who in 1925 authored *Nostra Dea*, the company's first absolute triumph and the play that made Marta Abba a star. In the 1930s he was a chief promoter of the theatre of the masses and one of Italy's speakers at the Convegno Volta. His 1942 *Cenerentola*, whose music he also composed, was a centerpiece at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. But his theatrical activities were just a small portion of his tireless intellectual work; it was as a writer, yes, but also and especially as a thinker on the role of art and culture in the fascist State – and as one who actively sought to bring a fascist culture to fruition – that he most interested Mussolini and for this reason in turn interests us most here.

When Mussolini met Bontempelli in Milan, he met a writer who had been utterly changed by the Great War: that experience converted him to the avant-garde, for at the front he befriended a number of the futurists, and under their influence was quickly convinced that

[252] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani*, cit., pp. 332, 347, 360.

art could be the impetus to – rather than a distraction from – the practice of politics and social change. For the poet who had once been a Carduccian classicist, literature became the attempt to overcome the contrast between contemplation and action, and the tool for combatting an increasingly materialistic and superficial bourgeois society.[253] At the age of forty-one in 1919, Bontempelli had a great deal of experience editing and writing for periodicals, including *Il Montello* (a journal of the trenches co-edited with Mario Sironi) and both *Roma Futurista* and *Italia Futurista*. A close friend of Carlo Carrà and Alberto Savinio, and a regular presence at the Sarfatti home, Bontempelli was part of a group the duce was sizing up, for, as Savinio would recall, he then "dileneava un programma nel quale *anche noi* avremmo dovuto partecipare al rinnovamento non che politico, ma culturale dell'Italia."[254] When Mussolini launched *Ardita* in March of 1919 – when he formed the *fasci di combattimento*, too – it was Bontempelli's short story *La Vita Intensa* he chose for the very first issue: it was followed by the other nine mini-novels that made up the novel that took its title from this first short piece. "The Novel of novels," as it was subtitled, remains one of the author's most celebrated works.

The duce wouldn't have Bontempelli as a *sansepolcrista* – as noted, the writer joined Marinetti's Milanese *fascio* – but he did have in him an ally nonetheless. Later Bontempelli admitted that he hadn't thought the fascists would go anywhere: that they were right, but lacked strength. They were "santi pazzi," fanatics, he said, but at the time, "non capivo che quei primi pazzi erano anche dei saggi politici." The war experience had made it clear that a new century was dawning, and for Bontempelli the way to it was an aristocratic, anti-democratic revolution. And here it's easy to see why the duce had an affinity for

[253] In the *Giornale d'Italia*, November 1915 (n.d.), Bontempelli explained that he had chosen not to release his play *La doppia vita* because it was wartime, and people should have had on their minds "un dovere e un desiderio: l'azione." Letters from the Getty Research Institute (GRI) Massimo Bontempelli Papers, box 62. The latter comments date to September of 1934, now in Massimo Bontempelli, *L'avventura Novecentista*. *Selva Polemica (1926-1938)*, Vallecchi, Firenze 1938, p. 306.
[254] Alberto Savinio, *Sorte dell'Europa*, Bompiani, Milano 1977 [1945], p. 73.

Bontempelli, and vice versa. These words came from an interview with the *Popolo d'Italia* that the author reprinted as part of the 1926 preface to an older set of writings then published as *Il Neosofista e altri scritti*. Those older writings, dating to the fall of 1920, establish the proximity of political-philosophical thought of the future Head of State and his future Academician through a vertiginous conversation between the narrator and the Neosophist. The two characters debate, and the Neosophist makes his case that what Italy needs is a demiurge: a great fanatic who would put himself against the crowd rather than democratically pandering to it. Like a prophet, the demiurge would make it possible for word to become action, to become nature and history. His critical tool was rhetoric. "La retorica è l'azione, cioè la vita": the commonplace that makes sense of action, which was in turn "l'applicazione di una verità incompiuta." The prophet – and here the slippage suggests that the demiurge and prophet were one and the same – was the "attuatore di realtà; l'uomo di azione," precisely because he knew how to create the "luogo commune della verità che presente" – and this was called *propaganda*.[255] Bontempelli's avant-gardism (that is, his sense that art itself could overcome the gap between contemplation and action) revealed itself here, in an argument that the word, employed by a demiurge, could become action. As he elaborated his own artistic programs in the years to come, these ideas he would attempt to put into practice.

Pirandello had admitted his worries that Mussolini wouldn't be able to follow through on his ideals, and Bontempelli's attitude, too, was one of cautious optimism.[256] He was enthusiastic about Mussolini, but formally reserved: he wouldn't join the PNF for years – until, as an Academic, he was essentially forced to – nor would he sign the Manifesto, a decision that disappointed Mussolini because the writer was dear to him: one of his personal

[255] Massimo Bontempelli, *Il neosofista e altri scritti*, Mondadori, Milano 1928. Cited here various passages, see in particular the introduction and the first portion of the book, especially the section entitled "Ricerca dei protagonisti."
[256] Interview with Pirandello in the *Giornale di Sicilia*, 16-17 December 1922, in Pupo, *Interviste a Pirandello*, cit. pp. 186-89.

discoveries.[257] Nonetheless, interviewed that spring, Bontempelli made it clear that he cheered Mussolini on, saying that he was "almeno di spirito" fascist because he was, "almeno di spirito, rivoluzionario. L'Italia aveva bisogno di una grossa guerra e di una grossa rivoluzione. La guerra l'ha avuto. Le occorre ancora la rivoluzione. Sono con tutto il cuore con voi fin che permetterete di sperare che la farete."[258] This "wait and see" attitude for quite some time sufficed in the duce's eyes – for it was accompanied with active contributions to the would-be revolution. Mussolini later reflected that "la qualifica di intellettuale fascista […] non dipende dal firmare o non firmare un manifesto," and, in effect, when it came to Bontempelli, truer words were never spoken. [259] Even without the party card, he was on friendly, first-name terms with such hierarchs as Ciano and Bottai; repeatedly received appointments and accolades from the regime and its Capo (more than once Mussolini sent his compliments for articles or books he had authored); and – eternally present in various newspapers – emerged as one who "set the intellectual tone for the entire era."[260] Early on, Bontempelli had declared that the new, anti-academic and Europeanizing artists were the revolution's "migliori strumenti," and his ideas on how this could prove true were well calibrated with the duce's.[261]

In his first major speeches on art in the fascist State (for the Artistic Associations in May 1924 and at the Perugia Academy of Fine Arts in October 1926), Mussolini underscored the importance of art to Italy and to the formation of a unified populace, and he encouraged the development of "fascist art": "Io non so se i due nomi, l'Italia ed arte, sono separabili," he declared in the first. "Fu nell'arte che gli italiani si sentirono e si ritrovarono fratelli"; it was

[257] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani*,cit., p. 290. But the Capo also knew that Bontempelli was a key exponent of the Teatro degli Undici, and like Pirandello wouldn't have been able to absent himself from Rome the week before the premier. He was also later pleased to hear from Sarfatti that her presence at the Bologna stood for Bontempelli's as well.
[258] Interview with Luigi Freddi, in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, April 1925.
[259] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani*, cit., p. 286.
[260] Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto 1996, p. 42.
[261] Massimo Bontempelli, *Il neosofista*, cit., p. 13.

art that "ha raccolto la leggenda, la storia, il mistero cristiano e li ha rivestiti di bellezza." The State, had a "duty" toward his country's staggering artistic patrimony – and "alle promesse certe dell'avvenire." He took it for granted, likewise, that culture and artistic education were fundamental to the "elevazione morale" of the *popolo*.[262] In the same vein he spoke again two years later, "Credo che l'arte segni l'aurora di ogni civiltà," he urged, and with the terrain so magnificently prepared by the great artists and thinkers of the past, "può rinascere una grande arte che può essere tradizionalista ed al tempo stesso moderna. Bisogna creare, altrimenti saremo gli sfruttatori di un vecchio patrimonio; bisogna creare l'arte nuova dei nostri tempi, l'arte fascista."[263]

Of course, "fascist art," could mean something different to everyone, and to work through the problem after Mussolini's 1926 speech, Bottai opened a discussion in *Critica fascista*. Bontempelli took the opportunity to promote his fledgling Novecento movement and its journal *900*, which he had just launched in September: promote them, that is, as quintessentially fascist. He stressed his view that the practice of art was the practice of politics, at least in a revolutionary State like Mussolini's:

> Se 'Fascismo' fosse solamente il nome di un atteggiamento politico, quanto si voglia vittorioso e fecondo, l'arte non ci potrebbe entrare in nessuna maniera: sarebbero due mondi indipendenti e incomunicabili. Ma per Fascismo noi indichiamo tutto un orientamento della vita, pubblica e individuale: ordinamento compiuto e totale, cioè pratico insieme e teorico, intellettuale e morale, applicazione e spirito.[264]

The goal of his own movement, as he had laid down in the preamble to *900*'s first issue, was to invent the new myths and fables (the "legends"?) that could "scaturire la nuova atmosfera di cui abbiamo bisogno per respirare."[265] The novecentists' key instrument in creating such myths would be their imagination, and the method Bontempelli promoted was one he dubbed "realismo magico," borrowing the term applied by German art critic Franz Roh to

[262] Benito Mussolini, "Per le associazioni artistiche," in *OO* XX, p. 276.
[263] Benito Mussolini, "Arte e civiltà" in *OO*, XXII, p. 230.
[264] Massimo Bontempelli, "Arte fascista," in *Critica fascista* IV.22 (15 November 1926), p. 416.
[265] The *900* preambles are now collected in Massimo Bontempelli, *L'Avventura novecentista*, cit., pp. 18, 17-41.

contemporary painting (two years earlier, *900*'s secretary, Nino Frank, had also used the term to describe his friend's narratives).[266]

In the 1924 speech Mussolini had argued that the regime gave Italy a style – "la caratteristica eterna e luminosa della stirpe," which would provide men with "le norme per edificare le città future"[267] – and now Bontempelli insisted that his mission was a (re)constructive one: Marinetti's movement and the Great War had obliterated time and space, and Novecento would rebuild them. "Soltanto di qua dal futurismo può cominciare il novecentismo," he wrote, and confront the next important task: "il ritrovamento dell'individuo, sicuro di sè, sicuro d'essere sè, di essere sè e non altri." This new man, perhaps, would discover "un Dio, da pregare o da combattere."[268] (The resonances here with Shaw's metaphysical self-realization is worth consideration.)

Behind the trenches Marinetti held, Bontempelli would "cominciare a fabbricare la città dei conquistatori."[269] In this way, the head novecentist touted his movement over futurism as the ideal one for the regime in terms similar to those who argued that futurism couldn't be an ideal fascist art because it had preceded Mussolini's movement: he wouldn't speak of the aurora as the duce had, but instead say that while futurism had been the last brilliant vestige of the Romantic era, Novecento would "aprire le porte alla Terza Epoca dell'umanità occidentale," which had only begun with the war.[270] If politics had preceded art and pure thought in this undertaking, art's charge was to "segnare e favorire insieme,

[266] On Bontempelli's use of Roh's term and his development of magic realism, see Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000; Elena Pontiggia, "Bontempelli e gli artisti," in *Massimo Bontempelli. Realismo Magico e altri scritti sull'arte*, ed. *idem* Abscodita, Milano 2006, pp. 123-57; Irene Guenther, "Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic," in Lois P. Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community*, Duke University Press, Charlotte 1995, p. 60; and Maggie Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, Routledge, Abingdon 2005.
[267] Mussolini, "Per le associazioni artistiche," cit., p. 276.
[268] Bontempelli, "Analogie," "Giustificazioni," in *L'Avventura novecentista*, cit., pp. 38, 17.
[269] *Ivi*, p. 41.
[270] Bontempelli, "Fondamenti," in *L'Avventura novecentista*, cit., p. 23. Bontempelli treats futurism in "Analogie."

esprimere e portare a maturazione, la fecondità dell'epoca […] fascista."[271] He went on to describe an art infused with joy, wonder, and mystery: none of the "avanzi putrefatti dell'analisi psicologica, del naturalismo, dell'estetismo, del gusto piccolo borghese, del sentimentalismo nauseabondo" would be appropriate for fascism. This language would've been all too familiar to anyone who had read the first issue of *900*, but just in case, he closed his piece by insisting on the necessity of building, and of creating new myths and fables. That Bontempelli had demiurgic aspirations of his own, at least in the culture sphere, is underscored by his insistence creating new myths: the demiurge wasn't just a crafter of rhetoric, but the forger of myths as well.[272] "Senza volerlo, caro Bottai," he concluded, "ho finito per ripeterti press'apoco il programma di '*900*.' Era inevitabile."[273]

For some, however, Novecento was the antithesis of all fascism was supposed to stand for. From the start, Bontempelli had argued that fascism needed to "europeanize" Italy, and he gave *900* the cosmopolitan air that was natural to him, publishing it in French – for broad international exposure – and putting such elites as Ramòn Gomez de la Serna, Georg Kaiser, Pierre Mac Orlan, Ilya Ehrenburg, and James Joyce on his editorial staff. The contributor's list was equally impressive, including Italian legends like Marinetti, but also such names as Joyce, Chekhov, Rilke, Tolstoy, Virginia Woolf (this was her introduction to Italian readers) and a young Alberto Moravia, who would become one of Italy's most important novelists in the decades to follow. The editor's declaration that this European flair didn't change the fact that they felt themselves "*perdutamenti romani*" [274] did nothing to dam the hostilities of those fascists who rather jingoistically opposed foreign impulses, and a bitter polemic emerged, one that encapsulated one of the major aesthetic – but not only – debates of

[271] The comment on politics came already in "Giustificazioni," September of 1926, whereas Bontempelli's *Critica fascista* article appeared in November.
[272] Massimo Bontempelli, *Il Neosofista*, cit., p. 97. On *Nostra Dea* and the problem of the demiurge, see Patricia Gaborik, "La Donna Mobile: Massimo Bontempelli's *Nostra Dea* as Fascist Modernism," in *Modern Drama* 50:2 (Summer 2007), pp. 210-32.
[273] Massimo Bontempelli, "Arte fascista," cit., p. 417.
[274] Bontempelli,"Giustificazioni," cit., p. 22.

that decade: was fascism to be modernist and modernizing or traditional? [275] (Even if the duce had argued it could be both.)

The principal combatants against *900* were its ex-co-founder Curzio Malaparte, Mino Maccari, and the ultra-conservative *Strapaese* (Super Village) group, who promoted rural, popular, anti-modern, and native cultural models and accused Bontempelli of "diffusing a modernist culture designed for and by 'Jews and Pederasts,'" begrudging him the variety of collaborators – homegrown and foreign, blackshirt and non-fascist alike – and especially the choice to publish in French.[276] With the language of those intransigents who stressed action over reflection at any cost, Malaparte suggested that the *Stracittà* – super city – tendency Novecento represented was anything but fascist: "Stracittà ha una sua particolare tettoia filosofica, per comodità dei borghesi che non hanno l'abitudine italianissima di lasciar piovere. […] Grazie e Dio e a Mussolini, l'Italia non è tutto Borghese, europeista e pariginale."[277]

Much to Bontempelli's chagrin, the Capo del governo's highly publicized approval of the *900* project at the time of its debut did nothing to silence his enemies. He had gone to the duce precisely to get him "on his side," even if he knew that this could create trouble with readers abroad and especially with his esteemed foreign collaborators: "potranno all'estero far credere alle panzane della 'rivista di propaganda fascista in francese!,'"[278] he wrote to Frank. Despite this worry – and undoubtedly in light of the relentless polemics – Bontempelli kept pushing for Mussolini's support, even requesting an article from him for the journal. The duce promised one, but never delivered.[279]

---

[275] Tarquini, *Storia della cultura fascista*, cit., p. 99.
[276] Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, cit., pp. 25-29 and chapter two.
[277] "Strapaese e Stracittà," in *Il Selvaggio* IV.20, November 10, 1927. On this issue, and on Bontempelli's relationship with Mussolini, spelled out in some detail and including archival documentation, see the fundamental essays by Simona Cigliana, "Due epistolari e un carteggio inediti," and "Una lunga 'avventura': Bontempelli a Bordero, a Meletta (Ovvero da *Eva futura* a *Eva ultima*), a Mussolini, 'Duce Velocissimo,'" in *L'Illuminista* V, pp. 21-191.
[278] Letter from Bontempelli to Nino Frank, Rome, December 5, 1926, *Lettere a "900,"* cit, p. 111.
[279] Cigliana, "Una lunga avventura," cit., p. 165.

He also gradually withdrew his support from the review, which didn't survive past the summer of 1929. Adjusting his strategy in light of the "incredibili attacchi e calunnie" he faced, in 1928 Bontempelli opted finally to publish in Italian, and added political articles to the issues as well; he asked the duce to reiterate his approval, and also for another audience to discuss the ongoing troubles with his opponents. It wasn't granted.[280] The author feared that the raging polemics would jeopardize the renewal of his assignment as secretary of the fascist writer's union, and, in effect, his plea to the duce to help in this evidently fell on deaf ears.[281] The whole affair was complicated in the fall when Malaparte publicized some criticisms of the duce by Nino Frank and called for a boycott of him: Frank was no longer secretary, but Bontempelli was one of few to stand by his friend.[282] *900*'s last issue was published in June of 1929: in July, Bontempelli and his two closest collaborators (now Gian Gaspare Napolitano and Giulio Santangelo) decided to not even publish the double issue that was already prepared. The journal had suffered from the polemics, not in small part because its international contributors lost interest when the second only-Italian series began. The cohort admitted that they were reaching neither the new readers nor as many young writers as they had hoped. They recognized that as individuals many collaborators could be pleased with successes won, but their sense that the project hadn't been treated fairly or understood – more people spouted strange ideas about *900* than read it, they noted – was clear. Napolitano speculated that fear of self-compromise pervaded: the press that should have provided reviews or discussion of their work were reserved, if not silent. "La nostra rivista che ha il

[280] Cigliana, "Due epistolari," cit., pp. 80-81.
[281] Cigliana, "Una lunga avventura," cit., p. 165. On Bontempelli as secretary of the writer's union, see Keala Jewell, "Magic Realism and Real Politics: Massimo Bontempelli's Literary Compromise," in *Modernism/Modernity* 15.4 (2008), pp. 725-44, which has some interesting reflections on the significance of the use of magic realism, even if they ought to be placed in a broader historical trajectory to fully make sense of Bontempelli's negotiations with the regime.
[282] Giuliano Manacorda, "Nino Frank e '900,'" in *Massimo Bontempelli scrittore e intellettuale*, ed. Corrado Donati, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1992, p. 219.

merito di interpretare la parola Mussolini senza sovvenzioni del partito stona assaissimo," he wrote to Bontempelli.[283]

This last observation is terribly significant, as it underscores the chief tension in Bontempelli's approach to collaborating with the Mussolini regime. His pretensions to being a touchstone of fascist culture – even *the* literary interpreter of the blackshirt spirit – were accompanied by the incompatible desire to be this person as an independent, and authority in his own right. In the abstract, his thinking wasn't all that different from the duce's here, who didn't attempt to impose an idea of fascist culture on his artists and intellectuals because he thought one would emerge organically, thanks to them.[284] Concretely, however, it may have seemed that Bontempelli pushed forward his own very particular ideas of what this culture under formation could be, as if it were up to him alone.[285] We've already seen – as in the case of Gastone Monaldi – that the duce didn't appreciate it when artists spoke for him or tried to spend his name on their own behalf. And as much as he admired Bontempelli and thought he should be listened to, the duce had followed and been involved in a four-year battle: one in which, to judge from the novecentists' letters, Bontempelli continuously lost ground. A non-fascist fascist journal, evidently, didn't just sound off key to potential readers and contributors, but eventually even to its founder and to Mussolini, too.

That the Capo del governo had a sense that this problem was all too central to Novecento is suggested by parallel developments in the art world. Novecento was born back in 1922 as a painter's movement, featuring Sironi (illustrator for both *Il Popolo d'Italia* and

[283] Letter from Napolitano to Santangelo, cited in Corrado Donati, "Massimo Bontempelli e '900': un numero inedito tra due profezie" in id. *Massimo Bontempelli scrittore e intelletuale*, cit., pp. 187-204, 198. See also Ugo Piscopo, *Massimo Bontempelli. Per una modernità tra le pareti lisce*, Edizioni Scientifiche italiane, Napoli 2001.
[284] Yvon De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani*, cit., pp. 373-74.
[285] Cigliana observes, "da una parte Bontempelli vuole difendere la libertà del mestiere, strappare l'intellettuale al ruolo di funzionario dello stato, cercando di volta in volta di ritagliarsi gli spazi per un'azione culturale in grado di muovere oltre i confine, lungo una linea di moderata ma avanguardistica resistenza alla politica di autarchica normalizzazione culturale avviata del regime; dall'altra, acquistare e mantenere pubblicamente, a livello personale, un'autorevolezza che gli consenta di attuare nei fatti questo programma." "Una lunga 'avventura,'" cit., p. 168.

Gerarchia) and championed by none other than Sarfatti. The duce had supported them as well, even delivering the inaugural address at their first exhibit in February of 1926.[286] But, he preferred a policy of aesthetic pluralism, and awarded no movement the status as official State art. He had some harsh words for Sarfatti, therefore, in 1929 when she encouraged those who tried to "far credere che la posizione artistica del Fascismo sia il vostro '900":

> Poiché Voi non possedete ancora l'elementare pudore di non mescolare il mio nome di uomo politico alle vostre invenzioni artistiche o sedicenti tali, non vi stupiate, se alla prima occasione e in modo esplicito, vi preciserò la mia posizione e quella del Fascismo di fronte al cosiddetto '900 o quel che resta del fu '900.[287]

This letter to Sarfatti dates to July 1929: the same month in which Bontempelli let *900* go.

Although Bontempelli was inclined to see such developments in extremely dramatic terms (being removed as secretary would be his "morte civile," he had written to the Capo),[288] the demise of *900* can't be said to have damaged his standing with Mussolini or as a fascist intellectual. Generally, it would seem that the duce's distancing himself from that enterprise is better read as a specific response to a single thorny issue, which certainly had more at stake than Bontempelli's personal success, rather than as any sort of aggression against the author or a judgment on him or the project *tout court*. (In this, it resembles the "censorship" of *La favola del figlio cambiato*).

Indeed, Mussolini reiterated his faith in Bontempelli the next year by granting him admission to the Royal Academy. Encouraged by a letter Mussolini had the press office send him praising his novella *Vita e morta di Adria e dei suoi figli* – which the duce said had "caratteri di verità proprio perché la trama è irreale"[289] – Bontempelli made a personal appeal, confessing that appointment to the prestigious cohort would alleviate his persistent

[286] Even if, years later, the duce told Claretta that he didn't like Novecento architecture. Benito Mussolini, letter dated February 19, 1944, in *A Clara. Tutte le lettere a Clara Petacci 1943-1945*, ed. Luisa Montevecchi, Mondadori, Milano 2011, p. 121.
[287] Cigliana,"Una lunga 'avventura,'" cit., p. 166.
[288] Cigliana, "Due epistolari," cit., p. 81.
[289] Letter from Lando Ferretti to Bontempelli, Rome August 5, 1930, in Cigliana, "Due epistolari," cit., p. 82.

financial worries and also give hope to the young writers who, since the *Ardita* days, had followed him as their own. This was a gentle nudge for the Capo to recognize not just him, but the literary tendency that *900* had given voice to. He took the opportunity to remind the duce that his decision carried significance abroad as well. Telling him that he had been forced to live in Paris for the last year (his love affair with writer Paola Masino, a woman thirty years his younger, caused her family great distress), he wrote that foreigners were often surprised to learn that he supported the blackshirts: given his importance as a writer, his hostility toward them was the only conceivable explanation for the fact that he hadn't already been made a member of the Academy the year before! Not to admit him among its ranks, then, would be to further confuse their already unclear ideas about Italian literature, he warned.[290] Whether such pressing was necessary or not, Bontempelli got his way. When he received word, he sent the Capo an urgent telegram, thanking him and promising his faithful devotion – a pledge he would renew six days later when the Royal Decree arrived.[291] A particularly enthusiastic fan noted that the appointment was politically significant:

> L'autore del *figlio di due madre* e il padre del novecentismo non è tesserato al Partito, ma spiritualmente è fascista, appartiene a quelli uomini più vicini a noi di molti che ostentano lo scudetto littorio all'occhiello e conservano una mentalità democratica e liberale che si rivela in ogni parola e ogni gesto. […] Egli ha sentito il suo tempo come nessuno in Italia e alla soglia della sessantina i giovani lo hanno proclamato loro maestro, si sono ritrovati in lui con il loro desiderio di evasione dai luoghi comuni, con lo spasimo di accostare alla bellezza antica senza negare sè stessi, di raggiungere l'equilibrio tra forma e contenuto, tra romanticismo e classicismo. Gli storici quando ricercheranno nell'arte italiana i riflessi del passaggio di Mussolini e del Fascismo nella vita italiana, li rintracceranno nelle opere di coloro che aggrupparono attorno al Massimo Bontempelli, un giovane dai capelli bianchi e che aveva nel cuore la primavera.[292]

It's hard to imagine an article better suited to support the arguments Bontempelli used with the duce, or better suited to show the extent to which the writer was considered – except of

[290] Letter from Bontempelli to "Duce," October 15, 1930, in Cigliana, "Due epistolari," cit., p. 83.
[291] Telegrams from Bontempelli to Mussolini, October 22 and 28, 1930, in Cigliana, "Due epistolari," cit., p. 84-5.
[292] "Significato di Bontempelli," *Corriere di Sicilia*, Catania, October 24, 1930 (n.p), GRI66,7.

course by his enemies – so completely and naturally a fascist intellectual: like the duce had said, whether or not he had signed a manifesto.

When exactly things began to go sour between Bontempelli and Mussolini, or his regime, isn't clear. Near idyll seemed reached in the early thirties. Then total crisis erupted in 1938, but was resolved in a few months time. Nonetheless, sometime in the early 40s, the writer approached the Communist party. By early 1943 – when discontent was rampant and few were silent about it anymore – his distance from the regime was perceptible, too. When The Republic of Salò was instituted, the author's conversion was so complete that he was considered a traitor: the Nazi-fascists placed a bounty on his head, and he and Masino were forced into hiding.[293] This time, the Capo wouldn't be there to stick up for him.

The apparent ease of the early 30s is seen in Bontempelli's indefatigable work and, at least initially, the duce's appreciation of it: he praised his publications and the writer used these to exalt his Capo or fascist Italy more generally speaking. In 1933, Pirandello and Bontempelli traveled to Argentina together, and this time it was the latter who stirred up a ruckus during public appearances – not because, like Pirandello in '27, he insisted upon his autonomy but instead due to his insistence on extolling the regime in front of an audience who didn't want to hear it. The duce received him after the trip, as Bontempelli was enthusiastic about fascist Italy's potential to have real impact there and wanted to tell the duce about it. The next year, the Academic would participate in the Volta Conference and speak of the theatre of the masses program Mussolini himself had encouraged the year before – the playwrights was an ardent supporter of the new endeavors.

Even what could've been a major glitch, based on existing documentation, doesn't seem to have been all that dramatic: Mussolini himself ordered Bontempelli's play *La fame* barred from the stage in early 1935, just days before the production was slated to begin. One

[293] On this period, see Paola Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri. Autobiografia di una figlia del secolo*, Rusconi, Milano 1995.

of the piece's chief characters was a dictator, but this wasn't even what provoked the ban. And if its author was upset, he didn't let on, for just two months later he asked the duce for permission to publish some of his speeches in a scholastic anthology he was editing: the tone of the project and the selections Bontempelli targeted for it can only be described as apologist.[294] Finally, in 1937, Bontempelli was part of the journalist entourage that followed the duce on his historical visit to colonial Libya.

The next year, however, the accumulation of several missteps landed Bontempelli in hot water with blackshirt hierarchs. He first refused to take a professorship in Italian literature at the University of Florence, left vacant when the anti-Jewish laws forced Attilio Momigliano out in September. On November 27th, he pronounced a commemoration for the deceased Gabriele d'Annunzio at Pescara that irritated in particular PNF secretary Achille Starace, and this was the ostensible offense that led to a series of punishments: at the end of January, Bontempelli was prohibited from conducting any professional activity; his party card and passport were revoked; he was told to leave Rome, taking up residence in Venice; and booksellers were prohibited from displaying *L'Avventura novecentista*, which had come out in December and *Pirandello, Leopardi e D'Annunzio*, a volume containing the Pescara speech as well as one on Leopardi, which, though it had taken place well over a year before, was now called out as well.

[294] See Cigliana, "Due epistolari," cit., p. 92-95 for correspondence regarding the work, which includes Bontempelli's projected introductions and table of contents. On *La fame*, as the archival paper trail is incomplete, no one has reconstructed the events behind the banning, though Bontempelli's acknowledgment that Mussolini himself was responsible for the veto, which he published in his notes to the 1947 edition of the play, has been confirmed by a surviving letter from the censor, in which he told the author that the script's final line – "Odiatevi, finché c'è al mondo la fame" – "non poteva piacere a Mussolini, che vietò la recita del lavoro e rimase irremovibile malgrado si chiarisse che quella era la tragedia di un fatto fisico." See Marinella Mascia Galateria, *Racconti allo specchio. Studi bontempelliani,* Bulzoni, Roma 2005, p. 70. But the situation was more complicated than current research has shown: an article publicizing the performance that was to take place the next week at the Teatro Valle, starring Maria Melato, appeared in *Quadrivio* (10 March, 1935). If the duce's veto at this late date was the result of office backlog or, instead, an extraordinary intervention for reasons of "public security" – policemen charged with presiding over the theatres may have seen something they didn't like during rehearsals – is for now a mystery.

Scholars have been quick to read this moment as Bontempelli's definitive break with fascism, and the legend of the once-beloved intellectual sent to *confino* for such bald acts of dissent dominated the field until quite recently. In reality, things were hardly so clear. The writer's behavior was far more ambiguous than that, and the regime's ruling on him and his behavior wasn't at all final. First, when Bontempelli declined the teaching position, he told Bottai he would consider it for the next year (but by then he would be in trouble).[295] And the d'Annunzio speech – an incredibly dense work – was far more equivocal than scholars have let on, a truth underscored by Bottai's skepticism over the accusations of "intellectual antifascism" brought by a hostile Starace. Even if it may have betrayed a growing frustration with the regime or uncertainty over recent developments and directives – the war in Spain, the alliance with Germany, and the racial laws displeased many an intellectual – the speech can at most be read as its orator's attempts to speak his peace on fundamental issues: as he always had done, in plain terms and with relative impunity, such were his temperament and his stature. And now, with Pirandello and d'Annunzio both dead, he had more clout than ever. The very fact that Bontempelli was chosen to give the commemoration of the Vate – especially as he had always been an "anti-Dannunzian" – speaks to the simple fact that he was, then, the go-to Academician. That his intentions were at most to speak out, rather than break up, is further suggested by the dismay he demonstrated over how his words had been interpreted and by the persistence with which he sought to explain his true meaning and clear his name.[296] As far the regime's actions are concerned, Bontempelli was never placed under

[295] As most scholars have taken for granted that the Pescara speech represented a break with the regime, so too have they interpreted Bontempelli's refusal of the teaching post in Florence as a rejection of the racial laws. It's possible that he did find them distasteful (good friends like Margherita Sarfatti were after all struck down by them), but we learn from a letter written by Masino to her mother that the refusal wasn't necessarily absolute. Paola Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, cit., p. 79.

[296] Several details on the Pescara speech complicate the picture. Significant is the fact that Bontempelli's troubles began only a couple of months later, and Starace's complaints were quibbles – about the lack of references to Mussolini, or that one passage suggested d'Annunzio was greater than Mussolini – that had nothing to do with the "coltivata barbarie" or "feticismo della violenza" that in more recent decades have been taken as sure barbs at fascism. Bottai wrote of his skepticism in his diary, and there noted that the official who executed the sentence was the Federale di Roma, Andrea, Ippolito, whose intellect Bottai surely did not esteem.

arrest or sent to *confino*, even if it was made clear his presence in Rome was not desired. What's more, the duce himself chose to reinstate Bontempelli's rights and privileges just six months after they had been denied him. That is to say, his books were returned to store shelves and he could publish again, his party card was returned to him – he was admitted back into the fold – and he could take back up all his official duties, including participation in the Academy. He was even invited to give an important talk on Verga, in an event as important as the Pirandello or d'Annunzio speeches had been. More significantly still, Bontempelli received 20,000 lire from the Minister of Popular Culture, Dino Alfieri: clear compensation for the financial trial of those months he had been deprived of his livelihood and advanced payment "per quella collaborazione, che vorrai ancora darmi" – in other words, a declaration of the regime's desire to normalize relations.[297]

Nonetheless, that 1938 marked the beginning of the end is clear. More clamorous than any speech – and for this reason surprising that it hasn't received the same attention – was the new book, *L'Avventura novecentista*, which mainly collected writings from '26 to '33. As clearly as Bontempelli had offered Novecento and *900*, in 1926, as ideally fascist, now, twelve years later, he presented this new volume as his walking away from all attempts to

---

See Giuseppe Bottai, *Diaro 1935-1944*, ed. Giordano Bruno Guerri, Rizzoli, Milano 2001, p. 140. The text of the speech itself can today be found in *Opere scelte*, Mondadori, Milano 1978, p. 861-93. As Cigliana ("Una lunga avventura") has shown, certain writings of the post-war period, reflected backwards on the speech, are incriminating, but in my opinion scholars have been too quick to interpret the tremendously complicated speech as so clearly anti-fascist. It has been quite easy to single out phrases like those noted above as proof of Bontempelli's criticism, and yet, while I think it quite possible that Bontempelli's change of heart was underway, we must be careful not to assume that characterizations of fascism as violent were necessarily *criticisms* of fascism as violent: he had never objected to violence before – quite to contrary, having once written that one of fascism's lessons was that sometimes the only thing to do was use the *manganello* (See *L'Avventura novecentista*, p. 293.) As a case in point, take the "coltivata barbarie" that has been so often signaled. Bontempelli's eternal insistence that he was among the young and at the brink of a new epoch after the last had been extinguished by Marinetti – and d'Annunzio, in this speech – was perfectly in keeping with the logic of a revolutionary syndicalist like Agostino Lanzillo, who had stressed that "l'antagonismo fra vecchi e giovani era un segno del *ritorno alla barbarie* – coiè alle energie istintive, alle idee semplici, agli ideali puri, alla morale severa […]." Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia*, cit., p. 138, and 135 for the previous quotation, which is Lanzillo's. That barbarism wasn't necessarily looked down upon by the blackshirts is reinforced by Prezzolini's description of his friend Mussolini's spirit as "una specie di barbarie temperate." See Daniela Brogi, *Giovani. Vita e scrittura tra fascismo e dopoguerra*, Due Punti, Palermo 2012, p. 56.

[297] Cigliana ("Una lunga avventura") sets the record straight on *confino* and provides some other documentation, including the cited Alfieri letter, and I've recovered two others that fill in some of the gaps in the story of this period, dated October 2 and 8, 1939, GRI7.

reconcile art and politics. In its preface he wrote that the book documented "uno stato d'animo incline a cercare armonia tra il letterario e il politico, e rappresenta una personale esperienza ormai nettamente conchiusa: potrei chiamarla 'esperienza romana.'"[298] And, indeed, even if the break wasn't as drastic and immediate as has been suggested, the writer would soon be required, literally, to distance himself from Rome, and wouldn't return until after Mussolini's fall. But perhaps what he really meant was that he no longer felt himself "perdutamente romano." Though he would of course send telegrams – two, just like when he won the Academy nomination – to Mussolini in the summer of 1939 in acknowledgement of the "benevola sentenza" he had granted, this time his messages offered "gratitudine affettuosa," but none of the promises to continue to faithfully serve that the others once had.[299] The Bontempelli-Mussolini correspondence appears to conclude here.

*

Several concluding reflections could be made about Mussolini as a critic, but perhaps the broader questions that Mussolini the critic allows us to reflect upon are worth some attention here. First, it seems important to signal the way in which the duce reasoned in terms of teams: it can hardly be coincidence that his declared favorites were all authors whose thematics, though treated in very different ways, intersect with one another and with some of fascism's founding precepts. That they were each in their own ways kindred spirits for him and that this was the reason he always went back to them seems difficult to contest. But one of the reasons for which this is significant will be verified as this study moves forward: the team logic would impact the thoughts and actions of Mussolini the impresario and censor as well. Particularly in the case of the impresario this is important; there is a tendency to view

[298] Bontempelli, *L'Avventura novecentista*, cit., avvertenza (n.p.). Though I cite the 1938 first edition, the most readily available version of this book is the 1974 version, edited by Ruggero Jacobbi, who cut several passages, including the original foreword and the most explicitly political (i.e. fascist) comments. which, Jacobbi attested, Bontempelli would've repudiated later in his life. This is certainly one of the reasons this important declaration hasn't been given due attention.

[299] Telegrams from Massimo Bontempelli, in Cigliana, "Due epistolari," cit., p. 103.

the duce's and the regime's subvention of the art theatres in the 1920s – to be discussed at length – as half-hearted and haphazard, and while in some ways this is true, on the level of ideological and poetic choice, it is not. There was propagandistic expedience in the backing an author like Luigi Pirandello, without a doubt. But there was something more going on there: supporting the Teatro d'Arte meant bolstering the team of the Maestro, which directly included an admired intellectual like Bontempelli (who was of course one of the founding Undici) and indirectly those like Shaw and Marinetti, who Pirandello included – or at least planned to include – in his repertory. The duce's backing of them represented a desire to disseminate a vision for the theatre, and from the theatre. We'll continue to discuss that vision throughout this essay, but this look at Mussolini the critic already furnishes some precious first indications.

At the same time, the reader will perhaps notice that I have avoided speaking of the "fascism" of any given author, beyond the perception of it by contemporaries. This is a conscious choice, that has first to do with my wish to focus on Mussolini rather than on the writers themselves; what concerns me here is, indeed, where the Capo del governo saw thinking compatible with his own and with fascism, not how we might judge the creators under discussion here. But I've also wished to avoid the pitfalls of such conversations, which, when applied to literary works – and this can be seen especially in existing studies of Pirandello – often are built upon a sort of dualism, where the literary work is compared and contrasted to the life lived and plumbed for its ideological resonances, in an effort to get at whether one (here, the Maestro) was "really" fascist. In this logic, the literary work is seen to hold an indelible truth, a reality more revelatory, and indeed more real, than things done and said in the real world.

And yet, it seems to me that "being fascist" in the end had less to do with the (only partially discoverable) sentiments carried in one's heart, and perhaps even with what party

card he carried, than it did with public behavior: what a Pirandello or a Bontempelli was willing to do in support of the duce, his regime, their cultural production, their wars: what they were willing to say and do to forge the new fascist man. It has been argued that "non si possa postulare uno stadio ideologico 'puro' del fascismo prescindendo dalla storia del movimento, dalla sua organizazzione, e dalla sua politica concreta."[300] By the same token, for all of the time we can spend examining artistic and literary works for traces, or lack thereof, of a fascist "mindset" or ideological correspondence, I don't think such considerations – however illuminating they are – ought to be separated from attention to tangible behavior and to the very real workings of the fascist system of power. Politics are, after all, as much about actions and results as they are about intentions. Fascism didn't merely exist, after all, only in theory, but also – devastatingly – in practice.

Mussolini had no difficulty finding fascism in the works of the writers addressed here, but certainly his readings – or the readings I've imagined him giving them, as the case may be – homogenize them more than they deserve. They often zeroed in on single questions that, no matter how important they may have been to the duce's conception of his own political movement, can hardly be said to represent a fascism *tout court.* The distance from d'Annunzio's interest in ritual, from Pirandello's interest in the moment of action, from Shaw's utopian Supermanism to fascism is a long one.[301] And one we should travel with caution, with the knowledge that we may find many detours along the way.

[300] Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia*, cit., p. 23.
[301] On this point, see Stephen E. Ascheim, "Nietzschean Socialism – Left and right, 1890-1933," in *Journal of Contemporary History* 23.2 (1988), pp. 147-68.

Chapter Three: Mussolini the Impresario

Tra il dire e il fare c'è di mezzo la mia volontà. - Mussolini

Un giorno si leggerano nei registri di Mussolini i sussidi ad A.G.B.,
come si leggono quelli concessi dal Cardinal Luigi d'Este a Giovan Tabarrino.
- Anton Giulio Bragaglia

The Impresario and the *Capocomico*

Expectations were high, the stakes even higher: newspapers had talked up the opening for months, and Mussolini had already announced he would be there. Yet Pirandello would have canceled the debut performance of his Teatro d'arte di Roma rather than go on as is: he still didn't have the crucial squealing-pig sound effect, the lighting wasn't right, the seats weren't installed (in fact their cushions hadn't even been made)! Each day, actors' smiles became tighter as Pirandello turned redder with anger; if the famed Sicilian dramatist hoped to convince the duce to create a National Theatre, and to put him at its helm, he would need to make quite the impression.

The day of opening night, April 2nd, 1925, inevitably came. The two young men who had dreamed up the enterprise, journalist and writer Orio Vergani and Pirandello's first-born son Stefano Landi, probably rose early, as it was up to them to gather the 348 seat cushions they had begged from all the upholsters in Rome. Just hours before curtain, they scrambled to put numbers on seats (here and there, for there wasn't time to do them all), the box office phone rang off the hook, the famous imitator Ettore Fatticcioni fretted for his throat, for he had been hired in the nick of time to produce the butchered pig's lacerating scream and had rehearsed it to death.

But at 9 p.m. in the little theatre of Bernini's Palazzo Odescalchi in Via dei Santi Apostoli, just steps off of Piazza Venezia where today tourists can enjoy "Time Machine Rome," Mussolini sat down, the curtain went up, the show went on, and everything went off without a hitch. It was the triumphant premiere of the Teatro d'Arte, otherwise known as the

Teatro degli Undici in reference to the eleven people who had formed the joint-stock company (some said it was twelve: after a while, no one really remembered for sure).[1] They debuted with two plays: Pirandello's new one-act, *La Sagra del Signore della Nave* (*The Festival of our Lord of the Ship*) and the Irishman Lord Dunsany's *Gli dei della montagna,* (*The Gods of the Mountain*), written in 1911 but never before performed in Italy.

"Non si danno recite popolari," Pirandello had announced, and his crowd was indeed as chic as could be.[2] Men showed up in tails and ladies in violet and silver – their outfits matched the strikingly renovated theatre. In some cases, they had been tipped off by the press. In others, women braved visits to the construction site to get a sneak peek (a true adventure; as the architect, Virgilio Marchi, recalled, "Una signora ebbe le veste bagnata dall'alto da uno spruzzo di liquido derivante da un getto equivoco: pessima abitudine dei muratori per non scendere dal ponte").[3] In short, the hype was such that the night was not to be missed: anyone who was anyone just had to be there. So, dressed to the nines, the Roman elite poured in for an experience: not just to see the futurist architect's latest creation, or even the show, but also, certainly, who else would be there. And, indeed, it must have been hard to decide where to look: at the 120-strong crowd packed onto the tiny stage, at the nervous eleven in their seats, or at His Excellency Benito Mussolini visible to the entire house in the brand new proscenium box (hovering where stage meets house) above.

[1] Initially, there were twelve founders, but by the time they signed the papers on October 6, 1924, the shareholders were in fact eleven. The original group consisted of Corrado Alvaro, Massimo Bontempelli, Pasquale Cantarella, Giovanni Cavicchioli, Maria Laetitia Celli, Silvio d'Amico, Leo Ferrero, Stefano Landi, Lamberto Picasso, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Orio Vergani, Cesare Giulio Viola. Some of these first participants then defected: Ferrero, Viola, Alvaro (an anti-fascist, he was angered by "requests" that he keep political allusions out of his writing, and chose to leave the group; as will be noted, his review of the premier, though favorable, did not omit such references), and d'Amico (who, as a critic, feared a conflict of interest in his adhesion, also noted that he was uncertain about sustaining an effort to create a theatre "d'eccezione" (of exception) when the "regola" (norm) was yet to be found, an effort which also lacked sufficient means – and in fact he pledged to contribute a share even though he was withdrawing. Claudio Argentieri, a publisher from Spoleto; Antonio Beltramelli; and Renzo Rendi came on board in their stead. This information and any regarding the founding and premier of the Teatro d'Arte, unless otherwise noted, comes from the indispensable volume *Pirandello capocomico*, ed. Alessandro d'Amico and Alessandro Tinterri, Sellerio, Palermo 1987, p. 14.
[2] Pirandello, *Saggi e interventi*, cit., p. 1269.
[3] Virgilio Marchi, "Ricordi sul Teatro d'Arte," in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico*, cit., p. 408.

Pirandello, "lieto e candido nel suo frak" greeted his public, thanking the "Governo nazionale, espressione della gioventù italiana,"[4] the city, and the group of theatre lovers who had made it all possible. One can imagine him locking gazes with Mussolini, recalling the words he had written just days before urging the Duce to come that night to celebrate the opening of "*our* theatre," where "our" ("nostro") was underlined twice. But one wonders where his gaze would have shifted then, when he declared that the Teatro d'Arte's work "prescinda da qualsiasi scuola, da qualsiasi tendenza, da qualsiasi politica."[5] No doubt he was keenly interested in Mussolini's reaction that night. Nor was he the only one, for surviving testament reveals that the eleven shareholders, general public, and reviewers alike had one eye on the stage and the other on the Capo del governo. Even as late as 1933, writing a biography of the theatre company for *Scenario* magazine, Bontempelli, remembered the night this way: "E la sera del 2 di aprile, alle nove, il sipario comune si aprì sopra un sipario speciale dipinto per *La Sagra* da Oppo: un terrifico naufragio con navicella assalita da un mostro e salvata da un Gesù apocalittico, sul tipo delle tavolette votive dei marinai. C'era Mussolini."[6] In point of fact, unlike the King – who had merely sent a representative – Mussolini was there. But he wasn't just attending in his official capacity as Head of State; rather, he was there as the enterprise's most generous donor: if you will, as Impresario.

It had all begun the winter of 1923-24. As Bontempelli reported, restlessly wandering Rome in the wee hours "che passano tra la chiusura dei teatri e l'apertura delle latterie," Landi and Vergani lamented the fate of young dramatists who had work to be seen but no one to produce it. Night after night, lament turned to vision, vision to plan, and plan to pact: get a new theatre up and running within a year to the day, or kill the first person who passes by![7] They joined forces with Lamberto Picasso, a successful *capocomico* who had already

[4] Alvaro, in *Il Risorgimento,* April 3-4, 1925, now in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico,* cit., p.20.
[5] *Ibidem.*
[6] "Il teatro degli undici o dodici," in *Scenario,* February 1933, now in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico*, cit., p. 398.
[7] Bontempelli, "Il teatro degli undici o dodici," cit., p. 393.

submitted a plan for a "little theatre" to Mussolini but abandoned it to ally himself with this crew. Bontempelli and others came aboard. They then asked Landi's father to be *consigliere*, but what Pirandello became instead was the enterprise's beating heart. Given the duce's demonstrated interest in the theatre and in the playwright himself, it's perhaps not surprising that when in September of 1924 the founders had chipped in 5,000 lire each and established a joint-stock company, the next person Pirandello turned to was none other than Mussolini.

Il duce warmly received the dazzled group – Antonio Beltramelli, Picasso, Bontempelli, Vergani, the Pirandellos father and son – at Palazzo Chigi with fantastic news: the government would give them 250.000 lire. He reached into his wallet and produced the first 50.000 right then and there, laughingly asking which one of them was treasurer. They hadn't thought that far ahead yet (!), but appointed Vergani on the spot. He accepted that "grazia di Dio" from his duce's wallet and, once outside, his eyes glistening, he shouted, "Quell'uomo è un dio! Ci ha capiti. Andiamo a prendere un vermouth!"[8] Heady with the joy of being rich and understood, Mussolini's money safely tucked away in the new treasurer's jacket pocket, they had that drink at the nearby Caffè Aragno and then rushed off to work. And, to be sure, the Undici had good reason to celebrate. Two-hundred and fifty thousand lire – which they had estimated would entirely cover their costs – was an enormous sum, especially when we consider that it was more than the amount earmarked for all prose and opera performance by the liberal government in 1921.[9] At the time, there was no policy in place for regular theatrical funding; the idea that the government ought to sponsor performance hadn't yet taken hold. But the artists and intellectuals sympathetic to fascism had high hopes, for – as noted in the earlier discussion on Bontempelli – they considered themselves the best instruments for bringing about its revolution, and the duce's gesture was

[8] Lamberto Picasso, "Lettera aperta a S.E. Massimo Bontempelli," evidently unpublished until collected in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico*, cit., p. 399.
[9] The two major histories of theatre under fascism from an institutional point of view, where such statistics can be found, are Pedullà, *Il teatro italiano*, cit., and Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale*, cit.

reason for optimism: one doesn't take money from his wallet if he doesn't believe in the cause.

So, just what did Mussolini's money pay for?

First of all, a renovated space: a new theatre needed, well…a new theatre. Italian prose theatre was then plagued by financial concerns, flooded with stale French bourgeois drama, and dominated by divas, as we've already seen, but the spaces also lacked the modern scenic and lighting equipment that in other countries had ushered in a real revolution. Pirandello's choice of the futurist Virgilio Marchi as chief architect and designer signaled the Undici's modernizing approach, as the decision to collaborate with several important artists – Cipriano Efisio Oppo, Enrico Prampolini, Giorgio De Chirico – underscore heightened attention to the theatre's spectacular capabilities.[10] Marchi gave the *teatrino,* which had a small stage and bad sight lines, a total makeover. When that stylish audience crossed the threshold on April 2, they would enter into a splendiferous foyer – violet and silver, as we know – and from there could go underground to the bar whose silk divans and cushions made the whole place sparkle, or instead pass through the triple arches and climb the sinuous staircase to the balcony that had been added to the auditorium in order to raise capacity.

But of course, the house was what really mattered. The gray walls and seats, silver lamps and banisters, and violet carpeting giving "all'insieme un vago e armonico andamento musicale"[11] were a delight. Yet these comforts were nothing in comparison to the real work the architect had done. In addition to creating more seating, he lowered the level of the main floor by two and one-half meters in order to rake it and then altered the stage height as well, so as to fix the sight lines. The small stage – this would remain the most unsatisfactory element of the hall – was furnished with ample lofting and an understage. The inability to host a revolving platform as the best avant-garde theatres were equipped with was

[10] See Alessandro Tinterri, "‹‹L'Alba Apparì›› (Firenze 1933)," in *Teatro e Storia* 29 XXII (2008), pp. 361-382.
[11] Alvaro, in *Il Risorgimento,* cit., p. 55.

compensated for by the most sophisticated electrical grid and lighting to be found. Footlights were abolished in favor of multicolored lights and reflectors on and about the scene, which allowed for washes and surprising distancing effects.

And finally, upon Pirandello's explicit instructions, Marchi created a versatile mystic chasm: one that could hide the orchestra inside it, or form a closed forestage with a central stairway, or make use of sloping side stairs instead.[12] This formation, which allowed actors to pass from stage to house or vice-versa – a given for audiences today but not then – would turn out to be the most significant technical innovation of Pirandello's career, as we shall soon see. The dramatist-turned-*capocomico* owed this improvement to Impresario Mussolini: perhaps thanks to the rowdy futurist *serate* of the 1910s (which frequently saw the breaking of the "fourth wall" – that invisible line closing off the stage set in a box to be observed, separate from the reality of the house – in the form of fistfights between performer and spectator), the passage between house and stage had been prohibited by public security laws. But given the protection Pirandello enjoyed, a blind eye was turned.[13]

And the show?

If the public didn't know where to look from the time they walked through the Odescalchi's door, this titillation wouldn't diminish once the performance began. On the contrary. When the curtains rose, a delightful scene unfurled on stage; a barkeep, a folkloric type in rolled-up shirt sleeves and striped apron, called out to a waiter to cover the tables (and therefore the stage) with linens, red and blue dishes, tin silverware, and glasses. However, the steady beating of drums from the foyer – not from backstage – told Mussolini and the rest of the crowd that the show was not limited to what was happening on that regrettably small

[12] Marchi, "Ricordi sul Teatro d'Arte," cit., p. 55.
[13] Alessandro Tinterri, *Savinio e lo spettacolo*, Mulino, Bologna 1993, p. 74.

stage. "Il teatro intero è trasformato in palcoscenico,"[14] reviewer Vincenzo Cardelli wrote: something special was happening at the Teatro Odescalchi.

The barkeep had just declared that people were arriving; and sure enough they began to enter one by one, two by two, at times in bigger groups. But not just from the wings. More often, they entered through the auditorium door and paraded down the aisle past each row of spectators, under Mussolini's box, and onto the stage-piazza. First the seamen wearing votive pictures to match Oppo's curtain, then the scrivener and his family, then some prostitutes with their clients – men, women, and children of all professions, ages, hair colors, body shapes and sizes, in a blatant expressionist depiction of the array of humanity that is the subject of the play. Their chatter mixed with various sounds: vendors selling their wares, drums, and squealing pigs. Worshippers on one hand, revelers on the other, all gathered in the piazza in front of a little church on the first Sunday of September: the former to give thanks to the Lord who rescued sailors from a terrible shipwreck, the latter to attend the first pig slaughter of the season. The people, the colors, the sounds coming from every which way enable us to imagine that Pirandello *capocomico* was aiming for the sort of phantasmagoric total theatre that Richard Wagner had theorized. Cardarelli judged, "Col suo movimento ondoso e tumultuoso, la massa fa da protagonista e tutto quello che costituisce l'apparato scenico, luci, colori, costumi, acquista un'importanza capitale."[15]

The play asks if man is much superior to the dirty beasts he slaughters. "Il contrasto fra la carnalità bestiale e l'anelito dello spirito," Silvio d'Amico observed, was the theme "che Pirandello ha posto nei termini più incredibilmente violenti: di qua i porci macellati, di là il Cristo inchiodato."[16] This debate is put into the mouths of Signor Lavaccara (who is heartbroken when Nicola, the hog his family has grown fond of, goes to slaughter) and a young pedagogue. When the play closes and the climactic procession of the bloody crucified

[14] Vincenzo Cardelli, review in *Il Tevere*, quoted in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico,* cit., p. 73.
[15] *Ibidem*.
[16] d'Amico, *Cronache*, cit., II.ii., p. 487.

Jesus takes place amongst a crowd that has degenerated into an "osceno e spaventoso spettacolo della bestialità trionfante," the young pedagogue, who began as the champion of humanity, cries, "si sono ubriacati, si sono imbestiati; ma eccoli qua ora che piangono dietro al loro Cristo insanguinato! E vuole una tragedia più tragedia di questa?"[17]

The breathtaking finale of the performance saw the onstage crowd – which had billowed to 120 – parade back down the steps, through the auditorium, and into the foyer, all the while holding a crucified Jesus aloft (a finale the Catholic d'Amico could have done without). "E quando dal rosso ardente del saltarello infuriante si passò al giallo morto della processione," Adriano Tilgher wrote in his review for *Il Mondo*, "la gioia furiosa dell'orgia scomparsa sembrò cedere a una improvvisa tristezza funeraria."[18] In this tragic moment, as throughout the play, the audience found itself in the same piazza with the characters, attending the same festival, seeing played out before them their own abjection, their own "abbrutimento umano."[19]

The astounding conflation of house and stage, of character and spectator, induced Alvaro – then a fierce anti-fascist – to see in the play a wonderfully skeptical presentation of the "bestialità della folla [...] che s'imbranca dietro al primo simbolo che parli a quel non so che di misterioso che è in fondo ad ognuno di noi."[20] A reading of the play text today leaves one with the sense that Pirandello was interested, if anything, in religion, not politics. But, to be sure, at the time anti-fascists fiercely criticized their compatriots for seeking in Mussolini a savior, and of course the symbolic universe created by the regime, historians have amply demonstrated, may be thought of as the institution of a civic religion.[21] Any enemy of the

[17] Luigi Pirandello, *La Sagra del Signore della Nave*, in *La Sagra del Signore della Nave, L'Altro Figlio, La Giara. Commedie in un atto*, Bemporad & Figlio, Firenze 1925, p. 50.
[18] Tilgher, review quoted in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico*, cit., p. 73.
[19] The show's program note explained that Pirandello "ha intesto rappresentare quanto di tragico è nell'abbrutimento umano, e come questo abbrutimento può mutare senza trapasso nella compunzione dell'anima e nella macerazione della carne, non appena gli 'uomini in foia, sborniati e furenti' vengano richiamati alla loro vera natura." Quoted in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico*, cit., pp.7 2-73.
[20] Corrado Alvaro, *Cronache e scritti teatrali*, cit., p. 76.
[21] See Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, cit.; Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, cit.

regime could certainly be prompted to think of Mussolini's swooning crowds in exactly the terms laid out in the play: was there a tragedy more tragic than the masses finding in Mussolini their false god? *La Sagra del Signore della Nave* was a success. It received four curtain calls, ran for seven more nights, and would long be remembered as one of the season's outstanding shows.

And then the evening moved on to Alfred Lord Dunsany's *Gli dei della montagna*, a play thematically related to *La Sagra*. An exotic story of beggars posing as gods who come to an Indian town but are then discovered and punished by being turned into jade statues, it prompted Alvaro to comment, "Magnifico destino per degli impostori."[22] The response at evening's end was even more enthusiastic: ten curtain calls. Choosing these two dramas and collapsing the distance between character and spectator, at least from Alvaro's point of view, at the Teatro d'Arte di Roma's much anticipated premier, Pirandello the dramatist-cum-director pointed his finger at gullible masses and duplicitous leaders alike.

Watching these plays – it's hard not to ask – what was going through Mussolini's mind? Would he have seen the same social critique Alvaro did, and, if so, what would he have done? Would he have joined in on the fourteen total curtain calls, shouting "bravo" when Pirandello was called to the stage? While the press' anti-Pirandello contingent quipped that the shows bored Mussolini into old age,[23] we have to think instead that he had a lot on his mind – not least of which was the fact that he was as much an object of public gaze as the shows were. The entire *platea* (the main floor seating), turned into the masses, had the perfect view of Mussolini in his proscenium box above. He, on the other hand, had the ideal vantage point for the spectacle, both the play performed and the public in the platea-turned-piazza below.

[22] Alvaro, *Cronache e scriti teatrali*, cit., p. 76.
[23] The image, from *Il Becco Giallo*, 12 April 1925, is reproduced in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico*, cit., p. 341.

The politics of these dramas can be judged ambiguous at best, but watching the characters parade past, almost as if it had been designed for him, observing the overwhelmed public below, perhaps Mussolini sat comfortably, even proudly, in his chair, secure in that belief I discussed in chapter one: that "Pirandello fa in sostanza, senza volerlo, del teatro fascista." In chapter two, I've already suggested that it was Mussolini's, not Pirandello's, opinion that counted when it came to judging whether the playwright or his works were "fascist (enough)," and I have demonstrated the ways in which Mussolini's reading of Pirandello's works placed them in line with fascist philosophy. It's not difficult at all to imagine the follower of Gustave LeBon agreeing with the young pedagogue who sees the masses' bestiality as tragic. For him, *La Sagra* may well have announced a truth he was well aware of: there was a *popolo* out there that would be beastly until the right Superman came along and tamed it.

We might also think, though, that the potential ambiguity of Pirandello's presentation was a selling point – that the enthusiastic public response to a difficult, complex performance reinforced Mussolini's sense that it was better not to ask Italy's artists to create propaganda. If the theatre could uphold a fascist ethos even "senza volerlo," this was surely an attractive prospect for a dictator who had seen himself and his government emerge victorious from a severe crisis just months before and who relished considerable popularity among the

intellectuals and artists who, first, felt relatively free to pursue their creative agendas without pressure from the regime and, second, often hoped to benefit from its patronage. This is all the truer for a figure like Mussolini, who had the friendship and admiration of some of the great protagonists of Italian arts and letters of the period. In other words, selling the theatre out for mere propagandistic purposes wasn't in his best interests, neither from a personal nor from a political point of view. As previously noted, this was a key subject of debate from the mid-twenties throughout the *ventennio*; most artists followed the duce's intuition that fascist myths could be created without depicting "fascist themes." Here, I would argue, the Impresario was testing his theory; Pirandello, as a novice *capocomico*, was his very illustrious guinea pig.

Obviously, we can't know what the duce was thinking; but, we do know that he returned to the Odescalchi several times during the season: which tells us that, as always, he enjoyed going to the theatre. And, I would venture, that he liked what Pirandello was doing. One of the commonplaces about theatre of the *ventennio* was that it was stifled by self-censorship – that for the sake of self-preservation, theatre artists simply played it safe, aesthetically and politically.[24] Further on, I'll discuss the issue in more detail, but here it is worth noting that there was nothing safe about the performance on April 2nd, 1925. True, it was early in the duce's tenure (before the "crackdown" of the 1930s), but it was for this reason a very high stakes game the Undici played: they must have perceived that Mussolini's enthusiasm would open a myriad of possibilities for them as artists, for the future of the State theatre they yearned for, and in more general terms for the direction that their beloved and dying art form would take under this Impresario's tutelage. (And, we shouldn't forget, that

[24] See, for instance, Doug Thompson's essay in Günter Berghaus' volume, the only English-language full-length study on fascism and theatre, which argues that theatrical troupes, vying for funding for the government, "tended, therefore, to comply rigidly with all the legal obligations and directives – official, unofficial, or merely rumoured. The end result was a rigorous process of self-censorship, which led to a safe but frequently dull repertoire." "The Organisation, Fascistisation and Management of Theatre in Italy, 1925-1943," in Berghaus, *Fascism and Theatre*, cit., pp. 94-112.

his disapproval could have meant, at the very least, an end to the financial support they so desperately needed.)

In point of fact, it's important to place the Teatro d'Arte project – and Mussolini's motivations for supporting it – in these contexts. Beyond the immediate gain for Pirandello and comrades as dramatists, scenographers, or performers, the theatre was significant because it advanced, in Italy, what was a profound revolution in the art of theatre-making. I've discussed the modern aesthetic the theatre adopted, but the Undici weren't just slapping a futuristic design on top of essentially bourgeois plays. On the contrary, as was reported in *La Tribuna* months earlier, the company aimed for "originalità veramente intesa e non semplice eccentricità esteriore."[25] Rather, this cosmetic transformation was reflective of the broader upheaval in contemporary staging practices; if Pirandello and cohort hoped to create the new myths of the new age, their participation in the anti-bourgeoisification of the drama would be an important first step (and, in fact, as we have already seen in chapter one, it was Pirandello's staunchly anti-bourgeois stance that Mussolini so admired).

In much of Europe and the United States, from the last years of the 19th century onward, the "independent" or "little" theatre movement's privileging of artistic over commercial interests had given birth to the director, who was responsible for creating a unified stage presentation. The Théâtre Libre in Paris, the Freie Bühne in Berlin, the Independent Theatre and the Stage Society in London, and the Provincetown Playhouse in Massachusetts, USA, had ushered in an era of experiments in dramaturgy, acting, design, and staging. In Italy, on the other hand, Pirandello still contended with a "star system" in which the author wrote his text, the actress rehearsed her part, and the scenographer – when there even was such a person – designed his set but no one gave much thought to how these all worked together until the bulk of the individual preparation had been done. Even the

[25] Pirandello, interview with O. Gilbertini, November 27, 1924, in Pirandello, *Saggi e interventi*, cit., p. 1266.

capocomico who would hold any such "directorial" responsibilities typically was, as his title reveals, more of a producer who, in addition to his own performance, had his company's financial and other practical woes to think about. In this essentially anarchic system, the actor reigned supreme. What's more, all too often, troupes travelled: rather than having their own theatre – which would come to be known as *stabili* ("stable" house where the company took up residence) – they moved from town to town; different theatres, of course, meant different stage dimensions and machinery, which in turn meant making changes each time the performance moved into a new space.

Pirandello and cohort envisioned something new, taking their cue from the avant-garde theatres, especially the Stage Society, which Pirandello had become acquainted with when GB Shaw arranged for his work to be performed there. It was this encounter that had piqued the Sicilian playwright's interest in such an endeavor, for his views on the art of performance were deeply ambiguous. Pirandello the dramatist thought of stagings of plays as translations, not embodiments, and intrinsically flawed at that. But, he gradually came to see that near-perfect representations of the playwright's text would require that director who had come to dominate European theatre beyond the Alps. And so, when he became a "*capocomico*" – his activity as director of the Arte has come to be viewed this way even if he was not an actor – Pirandello explored these new methods of theatrical production.[26]

What most sparked his interest was the modern conception of acting. Enough with the *mattatore* – that overly histrionic performer who was more interested in demonstrating his technical prowess than the depths of his characters' soul; it was time to privilege that creation over the one who played him. A first step was to abolish the prompter because if the actor

[26] On Pirandello's views regarding performance, an abundance of articles and interviews are to be found. See Pirandello, *Saggi e interventi,* cit.; *Interviste a Pirandello,* cit.

relied on the prompter to feed him lines, he would never "riuscire ad 'essere' quel personaggio, e non a recitarne più o meno bene 'la parte.'" [27]

But probably even more significant was Pirandello's method for transforming the actors' relationships to their characters. In the traditional Italian star system, there were stock roles – one actor would play the old man, one actress the ingénue, and so forth. Pirandello hired several key performers whose talents were adaptable and who could play a variety of roles suited to them. In rehearsal, the maestro and his actors read and discussed the plays at length until the actor would, by force of circumstance, "agire e parlare secondo la nuova vita da cui è ormai stato investito e invaso."[28] Today known as "table work," this first rehearsal phase is fundamental in tailoring individual performances to the director's broader vision. Not merely a Pirandellian quirk, it was the wave of the future and one way this director-in-the-making took the reins.

On one hand, Pirandello held director-figures suspect (though he was fast becoming one), because he feared their imposition could disrupt that already fragile connection between actor and character. But if he could solidify that relationship first through table talk, he could dedicate himself to the rest of the pieces of the mise-en-scène, ever in search of a production whose goal was valorization of the playwright's text. He sought, essentially, to do "damage control," guiding the actor toward something as close as possible as that elusive embodiment. This notion of acting – and in turn of character – is foundational to most mid- and late- 20th -century drama. Pirandello wasn't the first to promote it, but that's just the point: the Teatro d'Arte was Italy's key exponent of the movement that changed modern drama and performance of it. Today we see this vision of acting as "realistic" – a signature aspect of "method" acting, where the actor doesn't simply *show* us a character but in some ineffable

[27] Pirandello, "Il mio teatro," *Rivista d'Italia e d'America*, April 1925, in *Saggi e interventi*, cit., p. 1272. Reviews and rehearsal photos, however, indicate that the director was not successful in attempts to abolish the prompter. See Gaspare Giudice, *Pirandello.* UTET, Torino 1963.
[28] Pirandello, "Il mio teatro," cit., p. 1272.

way *lives* the character's experience. Most striking about Pirandello's elaboration of this mode – deeply conscious, even material – is that he employed it in the performance of a non-realistic, metaphysical dramatic texts, like Bontempelli's exemplary *Nostra Dea*. To my mind, this intelligent and powerful dramaturgical strategy paved the way for twentieth century masters from Arthur Miller to Samuel Beckett. It's little wonder that Pirandello's works have ever since captured the attention of theatre makers from Vasiliev to Grüber to the Living Theatre. There is something for everybody in Pirandello. And the three-year workshop that was the Teatro d'Arte was where he developed this legacy.

Pirandello is remembered today for his plays, not for his directing – in part because the Italian system of the period limited him to being de facto an actor-manager with the ambitions of a director. But his approach to production ought to be counted as important a legacy in modern theatre as his drama is, for his staging methods were as ahead of their day in Italy as his plays were. No one called Pirandello a *regista* – the word had yet to enter the Italian vocabulary (d'Amico used the term "inscenatore," others began by using the French term "regisseur") – but he worked as one. The Teatro d'Arte experience was a pivotal step in the founding of what many decades later came to be the supremacy of the director in Italy. Reviewing the April 2 premiere, Alvaro wrote that it would be difficult to say which element the company did best, because there was a single person who worried about finding the right lights, the perfect actors, that damned pig squeal. Here he intuited something very crucial: there was a cohesion in this performance that was lacking in your run-of-the-mill fare. The Unidici's new art theatre, with its new technology and new methods, was achieving something unprecedented.

In this regard it's worth reflecting on Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* and its status as an undisputed landmark of modern drama. The play was first written in 1921, but the now definitive version of the play did not premiere until May 18, 1925, when

Pirandello had the advantage of state-of-the-art lighting and the staircase that connected the stage to the seating area of the auditorium. The new and improved *Six Characters* gave us a haunting finale and the most legendary fourth-wall rupturing of all time, when the dead children's shadows were projected on to the Odescalchi's brand new cyclorama and the stepdaughter, with her horrifying laugh, used Marchi's steps to run down from the stage through the house and into the lobby beyond. The play finally packed its full punch in this new version, much indebted to a total reconception of the theatrical space.[29] The Teatro d'Arte transformed technical (technique and technology) innovation into a metaphysics that forever altered the course of modern drama. When Alvaro wrote that "s'è avuto l'impressione che qualche cosa di nuovo possa davvero cominciare qui,"[30] he seems to have realized this very thing.

Despite these successes, and the Capo del governo's evident satisfaction with the enterprise, Pirandello's little theatre would not have an easy time of it: sustaining such a project proved exceedingly difficult. Sadly, Marchi's little jewel was open for just 63 days. The group had acquired some 652,000 lire between the government subvention, their own contributions, and private donations; but the unexpectedly high price tag of the renovations and the failure of box office receipts to cover salaries meant that they racked up a debt of more than 330,000 lire, much of it owed to Pirandello, who kept pumping his own money into the affair. One of the first solutions, then, was to abandon the Odescalchi, whose rental cost more than 3,000 lire per month. The company would begin a nomadic existence and also tour abroad (as they had planned), which they hoped would bring in some funds. The second season (1926-27) was nomadic as well, while for the third and last (1927-28) Pirandello managed to secure the Teatro Argentina in Rome for another go-round as a *stabile*. The

[29] For a performance history of the play, see Jennifer Lorch, *Pirandello: Six Characters*, cit.; See also Bisicchia, *Pirandello in scena*, cit. For documentation on the Teatro d'Arte in English, Lorch and Susan Bassnet, *Luigi Pirandello in the Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1993.
[30] Alvaro, *Cronache e scriti teatrali*, cit., p. 81.

initial contract had, as is typical, created the joint-stocked enterprise for three years; when the three years were up, Pirandello made the painful decision to dissolve the company.

While in the end the project failed (like so many little theatres before it), Mussolini's support of it ought not be dismissed as it typically is. A crystalline dynamic characterized the theatre's operation throughout its lifespan: when Pirandello ran into trouble, he turned to Mussolini for help. What he asked for, in large part, he received. However, as already noted in chapter two, this dynamic looked like a very Faustian *quid pro quo*. However – and this is crucial for understanding not only theatre history of the *ventennio* but also fascism's aesthetic politics more broadly speaking – the compromise didn't necessarily come in the form of damaging the art (as, in fact, *La Sagra* has already suggested).

The behind-the-scenes of the whole affair is too intricate to be recounted in detail here, but the duce-Impresario's actions in favor of the Teatro d'Arte can be summarized in broad strokes: 1) he assured continued funds from both the government and private donors to help secure the continuation of the theatre into its second and third seasons and then to absolve acquired debt, 2) he intervened on Pirandello's behalf when he ran into trouble with trust manager Paolo Giordani, who seemed to be keeping the company out of the best theatres, and 3) he secured the Teatro Argentina – and an upgrading of its electrical system – for the company's third and final season.[31]

For our purposes, Mussolini's backing of the theatre in these ways is already significant, but what's most revelatory is the nature of the agreement: the Impresario and his *capocomico* treated each other as something like equals, a shocking circumstance given the undeniable gap in their actual positions of power. This relationship is clearly illustrated already in Pirandello's March 29th letter to Mussolini about "our theatre." In it, as in those

[31] The life and death of the Teatro d'Arte is recounted in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico,* cit., but Alberti's *Il teatro nel fascismo,* cit., is another invaluable volume that reproduces the documents of the Central State Archives pertaining to the governmental funding of Pirandello's and Bragaglia's projects, thus allowing us to reconstruct in more detail than I do here the vicissitudes of their various projects.

that would follow, there is none of the simpering the duce would grow accustomed to over the years. Truth be told, if dozens of letters from *capocomici* in the Central State archives are little short of nauseating for the pandering that accompanies requests for spare change, Pirandello's epistle is startling for the brazen leveraging of his own cultural weight. As we know, in the early years of the Mussolini regime, it was taken for granted by many that P. Randello was a loyal fascist and in turn assumed by many that the Teatro degli Undici represented a political-artistic partnership.[32] Pirandello cultivated such a notion, and in fact used it to impress upon Mussolini how crucial – and expected! – his further support was. The letter, which also capitalizes on the fact that Pirandello was already "somebody," almost reads like a contract proposal. If in the autumn Mussolini was the "God" who made Vergani's eyes fill with tears, in just a few short months he became the devil of the Faustian bargain. Let's take a good look:

> Illustre Presidente,
>
> il nostro teatro sarà inaugurato la sera di giovedì 2 aprile. Abbiamo fatto ogni sforzo perché sia tale da dar lustro non solo ai suoi fondatori, voglio dire al Governo nazionale e agli artisti italiani, ma alla Nazione. Fino ad oggi, però, tutto si regge ancora sul nostro comune sforzo, perché chi avrebbe potuto darci la tranquillità dell'opera non ha risposto adeguatamente al valore nazionale di essa.
>
> Mi permetto di far considerare a V.E. che noi abbiamo sentito gravare sulla nostra iniziativa l'aspettativa di tutto il mondo. La […] responsabilità di aver quasi veste ufficiale, dacché il nostro è considerato tra noi e all'estero il Teatro di Stato italiano, ci hanno costretti ad esporci per seicentoquattordici mila lire […] per portare ogni cosa […] a quella linea di dignità e di probità artistica che ci permettessero di resistere al peso di tanta responsabilità e all'urto di così enorme aspettativa.[33]

Here Pirandello resorts to a classic argument: he tries to convince Mussolini that he, Mussolini, needs the Teatro to *fare bella figura* as much as Pirandello does. But what's so unusual about the maestro's approach is the expectation he lays down – the *responsibility* he

[32] Sarcastic critics in the press referred to the breach of expectations: "The government gave a million for the Italian theatre, and Pirandello presents four of his own plays in London," or "Pirandello gave an evening of Italian art: Stravinsky, Jevreinov, Raissa Lork, ecc" – naming a number of the foreign artists performed by or belonging to the company. D'Amico and Tinterri's *Pirandello capocomico*, cit., devotes an entire section to Pirandello and the Teatro degli Undici as covered in the satirical press.

[33] Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo*, cit., doc. 3, p. 130-32.

insists that Mussolini has toward the endeavor. What a turnaround from the fall of 1924! It seems incredibly daring: it's hard to image many other writers secure enough in their own stature to venture to speak to the dictator that way.

It is true, though, that Pirandello hits the right notes in the letter, too. In addition to the several references to "our" theatre (the hinge pin of the make-Mussolini-feel-obligated stratagem but also a giving of credit where it was due, whose absence would have been a notable misstep), he rather deftly implies that he and his collaborators are very supremely devoted to the cause they share with the Capo del governo – and by extension to the man himself. The theatre is "vivo and vitale," he writes, "Gli manca soltanto l'ajuto di uno che lo faccia nascere senza un travaglio troppo faticoso, risparmiando ai suoi genitori il pericolo di lasciare in questo travaglio la loro vita economica." We've already done so much, Pirandello tells him, please don't ask us to send ourselves to ruin. (But is this an implicit indication that, if need be, they will? He has already explained that in addition to his time, his work, and the guarantee of his name, he has given the theatre all his savings.)

But then, he resumes the previous tone: "Attendo perciò da V.E. un ajuto supremo e definitiva per risolvere questa situazione che mi imbarazza e mi impedisce il libero movimento della mia attività proprio nel momento che ne ho maggior bisogno." In effect, Pirandello's situation was quite tenuous; the Teatro needed help, and needed it fast. What made him write with such confidence, then? Perhaps that fact that he could give Mussolini the same thing he offered the theatre: the guarantee of his name. And they both knew this was nothing to smirk at. "Riceviamo inviti da ogni paese […] Queste offerte sono da me presi in viva considerazione poiché mi propongo di seguire la Compagnia all'estero, dove, con conferenze e pubbliche interviste sulla vita contemporanea italiana, intendo svolgere un'attiva opera di propaganda nazionale," the *capocomico* informed him, and, as we've seen, he followed through. Comments Pirandello made before London audiences that same June

prompted the reporter from the *Morning Post* to write, "sembra che il signor Mussolini sappia governare uno Stato quasi con la stessa abilità con cui il signor Pirandello sa scrivere una commedia."[34] A small price to pay for a theatre of his own.

A small price to pay – or at least it seemed so at first – especially when this pro-Mussolini publicity could stand alongside of but separate from the playwright's craft. This is perhaps the most fascinating detail of the pact: it is the dramatist, not the duce, who dictates, setting the limits of what he can and cannot – or will and will not – do. This propaganda, he wrote, "è il vero modo con cui io posso svolgere una diretta azione politica." The *only* way. Not with the plays, not with the performances; but as Luigi Pirandello vouching for Benito Mussolini: "Lo spendermi per un tale scopo non è soltanto per me fonte di viva soddisfazione morale, ma anche l'adempimento di una missione che io mi sento spiritualmente commessa da V.E." Do we have a deal, Duce? Just sign on the dotted line. (Or, better yet, just drop the check in the mail.)

And evidently this worked just fine for Mussolini. Indeed, while he appointed his Undersecretary of State to the President of the Council (Mussolini), Count Giacomo Suardo, to oversee the Teatro d'Arte affair, he personally intervened when it was necessary, which tended to be when Pirandello called on him to do so. Consistently, when the maestro went directly to Mussolini things came into place much more quickly. Such an instance happened on August 11, when after months of fretting over delays in the arrival of increased funding that would both pay off debt and secure the actors for the next season – which Pirandello blamed on Suardo's less than proactive movement – the beleaguered *capocomico* wrote once again to the Impresario. In this new letter, his tone was much humbler, for it's clear his worries were overwhelming; and yet his position regarding the government's (i.e. Mussolini's) responsibility became even more extreme: "Sono agli ordini dell'E.V. per ogni

[34] Quoted in d'Amico and Tinterri, *Pirandello capocomico,* cit. p. 30.

decisione che vorrà prendere…", he wrote, sending Mussolini a clear signal: artistically, at home and abroad, the first season was a wild success, the problems of the last months had been resolved "non dirò all'E.V. a costo di quale martirio," and now the fate of the theatre was in Mussolini's hands and Mussolini's hands alone.[35] This time, unlike the last (when via an inferior he had requested an audience with the Capo), he was granted an audience with Suardo within a matter of days. Following that meeting, in response to yet another unsatisfactory communication from Suardo, Pirandello admonished the Undersecretary, telling him,

> Il can-can che leveranno i nemici del regime andrà ai sette cieli e avrà una trista risonanza in tutto il mondo. Il Presidente che prevede questo con me, è perciò fermamente risoluto a impedire a qualunque costo che il crollo avvenga. Io intanto Le ripeto che il crollo *senza dubbio* avverrà, se non si rimedia *totalmente* entro questa settimana, al più tardi.[36]

The only solution, Pirandello insisted, was to advance him the necessary money in an account, which would then be reimbursed when the tardy donors finally gave their contribution. Four days later, Mussolini directly sent orders that such funds be made available.[37]

It's hard to know whether the promise of failure or the dropping of Mussolini's name lit a bigger fire under Suardo; however, I would speculate that what really forced everyone to move – and above all Mussolini – was the threat of the enemies' "can-can," the "trista risonanza" the world over. For if in the beginning the duce had been swayed by Pirandello's clout, and the honor "our theatre" would bring him, the threat of dishonor was just as real. And Pirandello was no fool, for in this period in an interview with *L'Impero*, under the guise of rebutting rumors that he had earned money on the enterprise, he declared, "non ho avuto neppure 500 mila lira" from the government and private donors: officially a clarification that the government had not given him a million, as the gossips said, but also a sly indication of

[35] Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo,* cit., doc. 45, pp. 153-55.
[36] *Ivi*, doc. 47, pp. 155-56.
[37] *Ivi*, doc. 48, p.156.

disappointment over what had been given.[38] What was to say that he wouldn't repeat this *ad nauseam* to any newspaper who asked?

In effect, the Teatro's inability to keep itself financially solvent coupled with its close ties to Mussolini put him and the regime in a tough spot. The duce's problem became how to support the theatre without throwing more and more money into what seemed to all the officials and businessmen solicited for donations like a bottomless pit. (Pirandello himself recognized his inability to manage money, in that August 11th letter asking Mussolini to help him acquire an administrator who could unburden him of such bureaucratic nightmares.) Alberti notes that the ramifications of an eventual failure weren't lost on anyone, as the May 5 letter to Suardo by Franco Ciarlantini of the Fascist Party's Press and Propaganda Office (and ex-president of the National Theatre Council) indicates: "L'iniziativa del teatro d'Arte ha avuto un battesimo troppo apertamente fascista, e la sua vita è troppo legata alla personale volontà creatrice del Presidente perché il Governo possa disinteressarsene."[39] And so, while Pirandello openly admitted that the situation was personally embarrassing, he considered it Mussolini's responsibility, even more than his own, to resolve the problem. To a certain extent, evidently, Mussolini and his officials agreed.

It is probably for this reason that Pirandello suffered so much when the company disbanded; his telling Mussolini that everyone considered the Teatro d'Arte a State institution was more than a ploy: it was quite likely an expression of his utmost desire, as he would advance a proposal for its creation already in 1926 and continue talks with the government about it even after the failure of the Undici and until his dying day. Pirandello likely hoped that his triumph as *capocomico* would clinch his position for all the rest: that the National Prose Theatre would be created and he would be named its director. Mussolini's treatment of the Teatro d'Arte, then, was indicative of what would happen in the future, regarding the

[38] *Ivi*, doc 44, pp. 152-53.
[39] *Ivi*, p. 6 and doc 10, pp. 135-36.

State theatre, Pirandello's personal position, and what all of this meant for the future of dramatic theatre in Italy.

The Sicilian writer's famed letters to actress Marta Abba are a truly extraordinary set of documents that chronicle the vicissitudes of his relationship with – and opinion of – Mussolini, frequently dependent on his level of optimism about the project. Horribly deluded when the Art theatre closed its doors, Pirandello was convinced there was no future in Italy and went to Germany. He had always expressed faith in Mussolini until this crisis, when in an about face he essentially blamed the dictator for the failure, expressing himself in no uncertain terms, "Ciò che si vuole è che nessuno predomini, nessuno alzi la testa. Attorno a Lui, a livello di teste che gli arrivano appena appena al ginocchio e non un dito di più."[40] Let's remember, this is the man who wrote to Mussolini as a "somebody": here his sense of his ability to potentially "upstage" the dictator becomes the explanation for the duce's reluctance to give him such an important position. However unconsciously, this notion in turn seems to have convinced him that the State theatre would never materialize: if the Impresario wasn't willing to save the *teatrino* at the Odescalchi because he was envious, he would never give his competition such a prestigious appointment.

Such a reading of Pirandello's psychology is supported by one of his many reconsiderations, this one in 1929, when he received word that Mussolini nominated him for membership in the Royal Academy of Italian Academics, a nomination that was of course confirmed. Pirandello, in the face of this honor, regained his optimism about a series of others that were likely to come his way: "È poi certissimo che i Teatri di Stato saranno fatti, col mio progetto, perché Mussolini tutto quello che promette, lo mantiene," he wrote to his young love.[41] Back in the duce's good graces, having received confirmation of the dictator's admiration of him and willingness to publicly reward it, Pirandello's optimism returned.

[40] Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, cit., pp. 49-50.
[41] *Ivi*, pp. 90-93.

Plans moved forward – he met several time with Bottai – but they moved slowly. July of 1936 rolled around, though, and Pirandello celebrated once more, telling the actress that the funds (thirty-five million) had been allocated. It would still take some time, three years for the construction, but then finally, the Teatro di Stato would be built. Bottai had intimated the possibility of a Pirandellian repertoire, but the dramatist insisted that his concerns were not for himself, but for the future of the Italian stage. Marta Abba, though, was on his mind: for if Pirandello believed his own light to be burning out, he wanted the theatre for the artists of the future, and especially for the young actress he had made an international star. "Tu sarai certamente di ritorno," he predicted, "e prenderai il Tuo posto dopo i trionfi d'America."[42] But on December 10, Marta Abba, the revelation of the Teatro d'Arte di Roma; Marta Abba, the muse for so many of its maestro's plays, announced from the Broadway stage on which she performed that Luigi Pirandello, Italy's greatest playwright, had died.

The dream of becoming director of a National prose theatre died with him.

The Impresario and the *Coràgo*.

Looking back on the Teatro degli Undici affair in 1933, Bontempelli wrote of his dear friend, "L'ho visto fare miracoli, e mi sono convinto ch'egli è altrettanto grande come direttore che come poeta."[43] Yet such a comment was tinged with a melancholy hue, as its writer surmised that, just a handful of years later, the Sicilian *capocomico*'s magic had already been forgotten. It's hard to believe that this was true then, though it is true today: for many, early twentieth-century Italian theatre is synonymous with Pirandello, but this is thanks to the visibility of the work of the dramatist, not of the director.

However, theatre does not live on texts alone; to better and more fully appreciate the Italian art stage of the *primo novecento* we need to recuperate one forgotten figure: Anton

[42] *Ivi*, p. 1356.
[43] Bontempelli, "Il teatro degli undici o dodici," cit., p. 398.

Giulio Bragaglia. If Pirandello was *the* playwright of the epoch, Bragaglia was *the* director. If with the Teatro d'Arte Pirandello embraced the "independent" and "little theatre" approach, Bragaglia had paved his way. The *capocomico* and the *coràgo* were both heavily invested in sincere attempts to save the dramatic theatre from its crisis; they were agreed that the director's theatre of European avant-garde theatres was the way of the future. Both had the explicitly anti-bourgeois stance that couldn't not appeal to the fascist dictator. And yet if Pirandello ultimately came up shorthanded in his Faustian pact with Mussolini Impresario, Bragaglia seems to have been the one who really sold his soul – and got exactly what he desired. Where Pirandello expected and demanded, Bragaglia said "please" and "thank you." The contrast in their dealings with the duce, I would argue, can be attributed to (character traits and the nature and duration of their relationship with him aside) the differences in what they hoped to get from – and give to – him.

Anton Giulio Bragaglia was born in Frosinone, about seventy-five kilometers south-east of Rome, in 1890 and moved to the capital in 1904. His father, Francesco, was an engineer and the director general of the Cines film studio for several years. His mother Maria Tassi was a descendant of the Roman Visconti family, famed for their work in archeology. Anton Giulio was the ideal product of such a union: he was often called the *archeologo-futurista* in his younger days, for while he never lost his interest in history and archeology, he first made his fame as a futurist, dedicating himself (along with his brothers Arturo and Carlo Ludovico) to experiments in film and what came to be known as *fotodinamismo*. He founded two literary journals (*La Ruota,* 1915; *Cronache d'attualità,* 1916) and opened, in 1918, the Casa d'Arte Bragaglia on the swank Via Condotti in Rome, which was inaugurated on October 4 of that year with an exposition of the futurist painter Giacomo Balla. Like the famed Serge Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes, Bragaglia was a Jack of all trades: a cultural critic and organizer, talent scout, director, designer, technician, and even occasional

dramatist.[44] Most importantly, though, he was an indefatigable promoter of a performance revolution that would restore theatricality to the Italian theatre. He presided over two little theatres during the *ventennio*: the Teatro Sperimentale degli Indipendenti (from 1923 to 1930)[45] and the Teatro delle Arti (from 1937 to 1943).

"Era un'uomo straordinario," Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia remembered of his brother, "aveva un grande fascino. Andava a letto con un [sic] donna e la mattina si svegliava ed era un'attrice, un'artista, una ballerina, una scultrice."[46] In 1923, critic Piero Gobetti wrote, "Se Bragaglia vi dicesse che ha fatto il giro della terra a piedi, bisognerebbe credergli." For many a thespian he was a genius, an "uomo vulcanico" (to use Gobetti's words) waging a war on boredom in his attempts to revolutionize their art. Such flair – and the enthusiastic participation of a number of like-minded artists – would ensure that, despite tremendous financial challenges, Bragaglia's theatres operated for nearly fifteen years of the dictatorship ("Non ho soldi, ma, con eroismo, farò senza,"[47] he wrote when he launched the Indipendenti).

Though the *poor theatre* nature of his Sperimentale meant that there was an abyss between Bragaglia's ambitions and his achievements, between his theory and his practice, his program for a Theatre of the Revolution – as he referred to his goal in an eponymous book written in 1929 and dedicated to Mussolini – was remarkably coherent. The *archeologo-futurista* saw in the Italian theatrical traditions of the past the key to the future. (It was in homage to the *commedia dell'arte*, in fact, that he chose the term "*coràgo*" for himself. The *coràgo* was the *commedia*'s equivalent of a director- stage manager: the most experienced

[44] Much like Diaghilev, he also often received the artistic credit for the work of his collaborators: people sometimes forget that Diaghilev had Massine and Balanchine who actually choreographed, or Gabo and Pevsner who did set designs, just as Bragaglia had other futurist artists who did his sets, his wife who did costumes, his brother Carlo Ludovico and others who sometimes directed.
[45] The space closed in 1930, but Bragaglia still did some shows as Indipendenti productions until 1936.
[46] *Il laboratorio dei Bragaglia. 1911/32,* ed. Giulana Scimé, Agenzia Editoriale coop. r.l., Ravenna 1986, p. 17.
[47] The Bragaglia-d'Amico correspondence is conserved in the Fondo d'Amico at the Museo Biblioteca dell'Attore di Geneva and reprinted in *Teatro Archivio* 13 (February 1990), Bulzoni, Roma, p. 9.

actor, who helped rehearse the *lazzi*, *concetti*, plan the use of props, etc.[48]) His1929 book *Il teatro teatrale, ossia il teatro* established the link between the great Italian (but not only) spectacle of the past and his call for a reborn theatrical theatre.

One of the most unique and impressive aspects of Bragaglia's point of view was how he saw his ultra-modern, indeed, futurist, performance aesthetic as the rebirth of an Aristotelean poetics. The futurists, he insisted, were the great philosopher's descendants because they, like their Renaissance forebears, had understood the importance of the *machine* to theatrical production.[49] For this reason, when we read his declaration that the tenth muse of the new theatre was the machine, we must not dismiss this is an (old-hat) parroting of his futurist colleagues. Instead, we must consider it a very precise battle cry, the heralding of a performance revolution that would be wholly dependent on a mechanical overhaul. "Per rinnovare la commedia, riformare il palcoscenico," was his mantra. (Were his words ringing in Pirandello's ears when this last sought everything state-of-the-art for the Odescalchi?)

For Bragaglia, the renovation of theatrical spaces would change not just the mechanics of theatre, but its very soul, for the logical reason that it would enable directors, designers, and especially playwrights to envision things they never would have thought of before. Scenic capability would breed imagination. In the *coràgo*'s view, the theatre had suffered at the hands of literature, and literati; to rediscover itself, it would need to turn once again to the material aspects of the art: "Io non nego che certi poeti, detti dramatici, non siano grandi poeti: nego che siano dramatici," he wrote in *Il teatro teatrale.* "I loro panegiristi cavan sempre l'argomento del lirismo, va bene. Ma, se mi darete le violette candite, quando avrò bisogno d'un pranzo, sarete gentili assai, però mi farete uno scherzo di pessimo genere."[50]

[48] Throughout his career, Bragaglia would dedicate much study to the *commedia dell'arte*, publishing several works, including a volume of unpublished *canovacci* in 1943.
[49] See Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Il teatro teatrale, ossia il teatro,* Edizioni Tiber, Roma 1929.
[50] *Ivi*, p. 43.

And so, when he opened the doors to his Teatro Sperimentale degli Indipendenti in 1923 – two years before Pirandello debuted as a *capocomico* – Bragaglia had already placed the "director" (or *coràgo,* or *regisseur*, for *regista* still wasn't being used in Italian) at the center of his experiments. In addition to renovating the stage, the key to revolution would be the recognition of the director as an author on the same level as the playwright. In championing this cause, he cited Bontempelli, presumably not only as an authority on the dramatic arts but also as one of the literati: "quando le arti son fuse nella concezione d'una rappresentazione teatrale, il *regisseur* diventa l'autore di questa, come già avviene nel cinematografo."[51] Bragaglia was one of the few who, instead of blaming the cinema for theatre's crisis, saw it as an ally in the revolutionary war, as in fact he wrote in a private letter to Bontempelli: "Il teatro è decaduto come spettacolo popolare; ma sarà questo che lo eleverà come genere d'arte. Esso sarà sempre più nobile. Sembra che il cinematografo lo abbia assassinato; ma si vedrà un giorno che'esso lo ha risorto. […] E` chiaro che il cinema non soppianta affatto il teatro, ma lo rafforza nei suoi caratteri."[52] The cinema, according to Bragaglia, was a shot in the arm for thespians: because it had habituated the public to the spectacular, the theatre – if it wanted to keep up – would have to rediscover its very essence: theatricality. It would take a director to bring about this rebirth.

Bragaglia's publication of a sort of manifesto gives us an idea not only of how he would translate his theories into practice, but also the debt that Pirandello owed to him in devising his own approach. In a 1921 special triple issue of his *Cronache d'attualità* dedicated to his Sperimentale degli Indipendenti, which was under construction, he wrote,

> La opportunità di un Teatro libero, è detta da questa stessa parola, che informa altrove non esserci libertà. Infatti esso sarà un teatro ove non dovranno esistere le imposizioni dell''impresario', ove non smanierà il fastidioso divismo della prima donna o del primo attore (in quanto non ci saranno né l'una né l'altro);

[51] *Ivi*, p. 28.
[52] Letter from Anton Giulio Bragaglia on "Bragaglia Fuori Commercio" letterhead, 12 February, 1933. GRI b7, f18.

> […] ove la parola arte non sarà il salvacondotto delle solite truffe; ove si potrà tentare con tutta libertà qualsiasi cosa nuova; ove il giudizio dei giudici fessi sarà veramente tenuto in nessuna considerazione, epperò non verrà petulato come è tradizione. Un teatro di gente che se ne fregherà, infine, perché se ne potrà fregare. Questo sarà il teatro sperimentale. […]
> Per fare una compagnia d'arte bisogna anzitutto non fare una compagnia: 1° perché non sempre gli stessi attori sono atti a impersonare i protagonisti di tutti lavori; 2° perché 'fare una compagnia' significa spendere cinquantamila lire al mese e di conseguenza avere la schiavitù sovra esposte.[53]

Though Pirandello did install a company, the symmetry in his and Bragaglia's views regarding the problem of the actor is evident. Bragaglia here, true to his futurist nature, is polemical against "the institution," however, and this is the first thing that marks his enterprise as "independent" in a way that Pirandello's was not. The relative "independence" of the two little theatres will be largely responsible for their varied approach to collaboration with the Mussolini the Impresario.

But before moving on to discuss Bragaglia's dealings with the duce, one last point should be made. One of the most striking elements of the *coràgo*'s work was his exchange with foreign artists and his unflagging commitment to producing them. (His fondness for works from overseas and the abundance of Irish – or American-Irish works – he presented over the years earned him the nickname O'Bragaglia.) The Indipendenti, inaugurated on January 18, 1923 with the debut of Bontempelli's *Siepe a Nordovest*, quickly generated excitement in part because any given evening afforded the opportunity to see – after a walk through the five art galleries housed in the complex – good old Goldoni done in new ways, the latest experiments in dance and pantomime (complete with inspired Russian dancers), or the novelties of all the hottest names in contemporary drama – from Jarry to Marinetti, from Capek to Bontempelli, from Shaw to Pirandello, from Kaiser to Rosso di San Secondo, from Büchner, Maeterlinck, and Strindberg to Apollinaire, Brecht, and O'Neill (in this it was certainly a model for Pirandello's enterprise when it opened two years later, though

[53] "Il nostro teatro sperimentale," *Cronache d'attualità,* V(August-October, 1921), pp. 3-5. Available for consultation in the Biblioteca Nazionale di Roma, Roman collection.

Bragaglia's production was far more extensive than Pirandello's, which over time increasingly centered on the Sicilian writer's own work).

Bragaglia had always been a fierce nationalist, but his patriotic sentiments didn't compromise – nor were they compromised by – this attention to the innovations beyond Italy's borders. Rather, in his view, Italian theatre had gone astray; the foreign practitioners he admired were carrying on an intrinsically Italian tradition: "Solo il teatro teatrale è italiano. La tradizione veramente italiana che noi possiamo vantare, è questa della teatralità."[54] The revolution could only be helped, never hindered, by such an exchange; as Calendoli rightly observes, "il regista in realtà ha sempre guardato oltre le frontiere pensando sempre all'Italia e al rinnovamento della scena italiana. La sua è stata fin dal principio una battaglia italiana."[55] Such a viewpoint was, moreover, hardly unique even among fascists who consistently maintained that a vanguard could only come into being in Italy if its intellectuals were abreast of innovations elsewhere (though as we've seen with Bontempelli's *900* experience, the more intransigent types disagreed).

So then, this is what Anton Giulio Bragaglia was all about. Like Pirandello, he played Faust to Mussolini's devil. What did their bargain look like?

The *coràgo* was the toast of Rome's avant-garde circles even before Mussolini became fascism's duce: the former opened his first Casa d'arte on Via Condotti in 1918, the latter founded his party in 1919; the former transferred his hopping locale to the Via degli Avignonesi in 1921, the latter marched into Rome and took up residence on the next street over, Via Rasella, in 1922. Their stories are deeply intertwined: Bragaglia was a mover and shaker in the intellectual milieu that inspired the so-called fascist revolution; it was Mussolini who allowed Bragaglia to hope his own revolution – of the theatre – would one day come to pass.

[54] Bragaglia, *Teatro teatrale*, cit., p. 21.
[55] Giovanni Calendoli, *Il teatro delle arti. Le attività teatrali dal 1937 al 1943*, EnapPsmsad, Roma 1996, p. 84.

The Casa d'Arte Bragaglia, from its inception in 1918, was far more than an art gallery: it was there that Bragaglia's editorial offices were, and as a consequences of its combined literary and artistic activities, the place quickly became a futurist cove. But these were the years of ferment that gave rise to fascism, and the meeting held there – by many accounts often heated debates – concerned more than artistic matters; indeed, one of the most important gatherings saw the splintering of the *fasci futuristi* into two groups: those who wanted to focus on artistic matters and those who, instead, felt the futurists should retain an activist agenda. The familiar participants in such battles included not just futurist artists like Marinetti, Balla, and Cangiullo, but also Giuseppe Bottai – then editor of *Roma futurista*, later of *Critica fascista*; then an intransigent, later a fascist reformer – and Mussolini himself. Many years later, Marinetti recalled Bragaglia's contribution to fascism of the first hour:

> Dalla *Galleria d'Arte* … partivano spesso i poeti e gli artisti futuristi per le dimostrazioni e le battaglie di piazza cosicché Anton Giulio Bragaglia ebbe l'onore di custodire nel suo ufficio una delle bandiere rivoluzionarie tricolori. In questa atmosfera di sommossa egli come ospite sosteneva brillantemente gli urti e i contatti con la Polizia nettamente ostile ai rivoluzionari e alla loro violenta azione fascista.[56]

Though Bragaglia tended to stress his interest in aesthetic rather than political matters, some scholars surmise that this early commitment to fascism – and old friendship with Mussolini – urged the duce and his hierarchs to look with kind eyes on the man later. Archival documents, likewise, attest to the common perception that Bragaglia and Mussolini had a historical friendship; the *coràgo* was prone to use this perception to his advantage, though correspondence between him and the duce prove that it was exaggerated.[57]

---

[56] Marinetti's declaration regarding Bragaglia is cited in Alberti, cit., pp. 219-22. In addition to Alberti, on this season of futurism and fascism and the gatherings at the Casa d'Arte Bragaglia, see F.T. Marinetti, *Taccuini 1915/1921*, cit.; Elisabetta Mondello, *Roma Futurista. I periodici e i luoghi dell'avanguardia nella roma degli anni venti*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1990; and Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, cit.

[57] Unlike Marinetti and d'Annunzio, for example, Bragaglia used the polite form of address ("Lei" then "Voi" once fascist dogma stipulated its use) rather than the familiar "tu" in his correspondence with the Capo. Letters were certainly cordial, but in no way suggested any intimacy. Testaments to public perceptions of the relationship are best had in the records kept by the political police who surveilled the director. ACS, PolPol, fascicolo Anton Giulio Bragaglia.

In any case, when the Casa d'Arte outgrew its space and over-tried the neighbors' patience (what a ruckus they made in there!), the *archeologo-futurista* sought a new haunt and struck gold: during construction in the newly-acquired Tittoni and Vassalli palaces, nos. 7-8 on the nearby Via degli Avignonesi, he and his architect – a familiar name by now, Virgilio Marchi – stumbled upon second-century Roman baths: this underground lair would host five art galleries, the little theatre Bragaglia had always dreamed of having, and a tavern for eating, drinking, and dancing whose proceeds would fund the stage operations. Finally, a revolutionary theatre laboratory of his own!

We've already heard about the theatrical fare the *coràgo* and cohort offered. But there was much more to a night *chez* Bragaglia than the play. Once the show was over, the *platea* would rise up to stage level (Marchi seemed to be the master of the modified house), in just minutes tables and chairs appeared, and the evening at the theatre became an evening out to dinner and then some. Clients ate, drank, and watched the actors from the mainstream theatres pour in (Bragaglia fed them at discount prices); they danced away until 8 a.m, while the exhausted host at a certain point would sneak off, for he had rehearsals with the actors at nine: "Una vita infernale," he reported, but necessary to keep the theatre running.[58]

The place was a favorite rendezvous for many notables: a slew of Roman intellectuals, the duce's future son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano (who was a theatre critic), Alfonso XIII, Re Fuad, Trotsky. "Tante personalità straniere trovavano tranquilla ospitalità presso questo ritrovo artistico, che non intendeva vestirsi di nessun colore politico per poter accogliere tutti," Bragaglia explained. Not one for modesty, he declared, "Il mondo intellettuale europeo era di casa da me e nessuno è stato a Roma senza frequentarmi."[59] At

[58] Bragaglia's description of the place is cited at length in Mario Verdone, *Anton Giulio Bragaglia*, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Roma 1965, pp. 37-39.
[59] *Ivi*, p. 38.

the inauguration, Gobetti wrote, "sono stati invitati il Re, S. E. [President of the Senate Tommaso] Tittoni, S.E. Siciliani. Sino a questo punto arrivano le risorse di Bragaglia."[60]

But no Mussolini? In effect… it would seem that while Mussolini the revolutionary joined his comrades from time to time in Via Condotti, when Bragaglia was settled in Via degli Avignonesi, Mussolini the fascist stopped coming 'round, even though he lived on the next street over. He didn't go that night, and it was only several days after the inauguration, on January 22, that his secretary communicated the Prime Minister's pleasure regarding the theatre's "nobili fini" and his regret at not having been able to attend. [61] Wasn't this strange? Mussolini's old pals were the stars of the show, so to speak: Bragaglia was the proprietor, Marinetti was to give a speech introducing the theatre and its mission, a play by Bontempelli, never before seen, would kick off the season. What's more, as explained in the letter inviting the Capo and his secretary to the opening, part of the proceeds would go to the families of (fascist) war veterans; Mussolini's presence there would "dare un segno di simpatia a questa iniziativa artistica e patriottica."[62] And yet, in January of 1923 – the year in which Bragaglia officially joined the fascist party[63] and opened the Teatro – Mussolini didn't grace the Teatro Sperimentale degli Indipendenti's premiere with his formidable presence. In fact, he never would. This is perhaps all the more noteworthy because the enterprise received a subvention from the government (as the Teatro's letterhead proudly proclaimed). And yet, where Mussolini' support for Pirandello's project would be ceremonious and highly publicized – to the point of creating pressure for the regime to keep it alive – Bragaglia would receive quiet, more modest backing in the form of season ticket purchases.

---

[60] Piero Gobetti, *Opere Complete.* Volume III, *Scritti di critica teatrale*. Torino, Einaudi, 1974. Bragaglia appears in several of Gobetti's articles. See in particular "Il Teatro Sperimentale," 1922, pp.444-46 and "Bragaglia direttore di scena," 1923, pp. 560-63. The others' testimonies can be found in Verdone, *Anton Giulio Bragalia*, cit., pp. 50-51.
[61] Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo*, cit., docs 126, 127, p. 220.
[62] *Ivi*, doc. 126, p. 220.
[63] The document attesting to this fact can be found in ACS MI PolPol, Anton Giulio Bragaglia.

This absence from Bragaglia's premier was indeed as significant as his attendance at Pirandello's would be. Earlier, we saw how using Mussolini's name could take a *capocomico* far, and archival documents attest to Bragaglia's use of this tactic – hanging a poster on the theatre's door announcing the government's sponsorship,[64] talking about the advantages his friendship with the duce afforded him[65] – as well as to the success he had with it. But if the *coràgo* earned credentials for himself by making frequent references to the good old days when Bottai hung around the Casa d'Arte and Mussolini the uomo-tank was "scherzoso e scanzonato" with him personally,[66] Mussolini didn't do much to second him. On the contrary, an indirect reference negates Bragaglia's importance to that season. "Soffici e Marinetti erano i soli letterati italiani degni della qualifica di uomini di azioni," Mussolini told De Begnac, and continued,

> Marinetti giurava sull'efficienza del fascismo romano, praticamente inesistente sul piano operativo. Pensava che Ulisse Igliori, Giuseppe Bottai, Mario Carli, Nino Businelli, Nino D'Aroma, Enrico Rocca costituissero un esercito; che i piccoli periodici la cui diffusione andava dalla terza saletta di Aragno alla sala corse degli Avignonesi alla galleria San Marcello, fossero le artiglierie capaci di sfondare i portoni del Viminale.[67]

In other words, Bragaglia was not one of the warriors, nor was his printing press in the Via degli Avignonesi a true weapon of the fascist revolution. This is a stark contrast with the high praise Mussolini had for Pirandello at every turn, with the way in which he transformed Pirandello's very thought into action. Despite his touting the modest support he had received from the government, Bragaglia's own comments betray Mussolini's real attitude toward the establishment: when he came to power, he "rispettò l'iniziativa, nononstante che essa agisse sotto il palazzo dove lui abitava."[68] And the reason for such diffidence? We might easily

[64] 21 may 1929, ACS, MI PolPol Anton Giulio Bragaglia.
[65] 26 February 1929, an interesting document reporting gossip that Bragaglia was able to take advantage of his relationship with Mussolini in getting friends released from *confino.* ACS MI PolPol Anton Giulio Bragaglia.
[66] Bragaglia described Mussolini this way in a collective volume entitled *A Mussolini gli artisti italiani,* given to him in celebration of the anniversary of the March on Rome. Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo,* cit., p. 63.
[67] De Begnac, *Taccuini Mussoliniani,* cit., p. 107.
[68] Verdone, *Anton Giulio Bragaglia*, cit., p. 38.

understand it as a question of risks versus rewards. The cost of supporting Pirandello's theatre were high, but the advantages in doing so were clear. Could the same be said for Bragaglia?

Between 1923 and 1930 (when the theatre was shut down), Bragaglia ran into trouble with the forces of law and order a handful of times; Mussolini vacillated in his responses to Bragaglia's pleas for help. After an initial telephone call to the police on Bragaglia's behalf, when they came around a second time in 1923 to close him down, the *coràgo*'s appeal to him to intervene evidently went unanswered. At the end of 1926, when police restricted nighttime hours of Roman hotels and ordered the Avignonesi complex closed (because of its after-hours dance hall), a massive press campaign – led by Bragaglia's arch-nemesis, critic Silvio d'Amico – rallied in its defence: The *Giornale d'Italia*, *Il Tevere, L'Impero*, Arnaldo Mussolini's *Popolo d'Italia* and even some foreign newspapers began to speak of the scandal of Italy's "only avant-garde stage" being closed; informed of this overwhelming swell of public opinion, Mussolini ordered its reopening – but without the dancing.[69]

Bragaglia's troubles wouldn't abate, however, and he recalled one instance in the theatre's last years when a conversation between him and the duce went like this:

> MUSSOLINI (*con aria severissima*): Ma che cosa avete finito col fare, lì sotto?
>
> BRAGAGLIA: Ciò che facevamo quando ci frequentavate voi. Dopo teatro io bevo aranciate, gli altri bevono champagne e ballano.[70]

Finally, when in 1930 the director found himself sinking too far into debt to keep the theatre running, the duce didn't save him, either. His one-word instructions – something that will become all too familiar as we tell the story of Mussolini, Man of the Theatre – on the document in which the problem was posed to him was simply "CHIUSURA." After another desperate appeal, though, Mussolini allocated 25,000 lire: half of what Bragaglia had asked

[69] Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo*, cit., p. 68.
[70] Verdone, *Anton Giulio Bragaglia*, cit., p. 38.

for. It wasn't enough, and the director wrote to Guido Beer (the duce's Head of Cabinet) a few days later that the enterprise would fold.[71]

Lest we interpret this as simple disinterest (or even just as a lesson learned from the Pirandello affair that bailouts can become a vicious cycle), though, let's look at the correspondence from the months leading up to the decision: with these documents in hand, it is quite reasonable to conclude that it was tied not only to financial considerations but also to the problems – themselves interconnected – of public security, decency, and the significance of the Theatre's being attached to the government in any official way, however small.

The abundance of police reports from 1929 onward indicate greater attention paid to Bragaglia and his enterprises; in addition to some of his shadier movements, of greatest interest to investigators was the *coràgo*'s opinion of the duce, and the activities and reputation of the Indipendenti. There is the January report that two women known to be prostitutes ("e perfino da marciapiedi"!) frequented the place during its "tavern" hours and that this caused protests on the part of foreign visitors who "hanno deplorato la cosa"[72]; the series of notices in May-June that some not very nice things ("poco riguardose") were being said about the duce, especially in relation to the Lateran accords;[73] the warnings in December that "è già da parecchio tempo che Bragaglia sparla del Fascismo" and was now saying that he would like to leave Italy "perché la vita è diventata insupportabile […] e si muore di fame"[74]; and finally, the letter in which the appointed spy indicates that the regime might have reason to feel a little uneasy about its attachment to the place:

> Sarebbe anche utile che dalle locandine sulla porta del sotterraneo fosse tolta la dicitura che il Governo poggia a sussidia questo locale.
> Molti italiani e stranieri che frequentano durante le ore notturne questo locale, trovano un tabarin in piena attività e si meravigliano.

[71] Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo,* cit., p. 76, docs. 189-191, p. 252.
[72] January 3, 1929, ACS MI PolPol Anton Giulio Bragaglia.
[73] See for example May 17, ACS MI PolPol Anton Giulio Bragaglia.
[74] See for example December 5, ACS MI PolPol Anton Giulio Bragaglia.

> Si sa ancora che Bragaglia attraverso le sue relazioni all'Interno mira a farsi dare il Teatro Argentina, cioè l'unico teatro di prosa ufficialmente presentabile che ci sia a Roma.
> Se tale concessione venisse effettuata, provocherebbe sicuramente impressione sgradevole, non solo tra gli artisti e intellettuali, ma anche nell'opinione pubblica.[75]

In the early years, Bragaglia had protested the unwanted attention from the police, defending himself against accusations of suspicious activity with a letter to Mussolini that commented, "Come se l'attività di 18 mesi d'un Circolo di propaganda avanguardistica possa essere clandestine!"[76] But with all of these circumstances converging, it's not difficult for us to imagine that when given the chance to quickly eliminate the problem with a red-penciled "CHIUSURA," Mussolini took it without much regret.

These public security and political problems, influential as they were, were not however the only issues at hand. There was the aesthetic question, and the Impresario may well have had concerns as to whether the *coràgo*'s enterprise was up to fascist snuff. The tiny subterranean house was what in Italian is called a *teatro d'eccezione* (exceptional theatre, or better, theatre for the exceptional), modeled on the "independent" and "little" theatres, and "little" in the truest sense: even with a balcony, Bragaglia's house sat just two hundred people (though there was standing room as well). By all accounts, the theatre was usually packed; yet we are still talking about a small, select few (and likely, very often, the same season ticket holders).

Fewer seats meant fewer *lire*; Bragaglia's *poor theatre* was completely incapable of realizing his artistic ambitions for a machinery-driven theatrical revolution. While presumably for the *coràgo* the beauty of the challenge was the attempt to achieve high artistic standards on a shoestring budget, it also inevitably meant that, however appreciated they

[75] May 21, 1929 ACS MI PolPol Anton Giulio Bragaglia.
[76] Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo*, cit., doc. 133, p. 224.

were for their audacity, Bragaglia's productions lacked the wealth and polish that a venture touting State sponsorship would be expected to have.

D'Amico's reviews alone – especially because he had very different ideas from Bragaglia and severe objections to the practice of avant-garde performance – catalog the many faults of the theatre from this point of view: the space "coi suoi spettatori seduti contro il palcoscenichetto basso come se stessero a tavola, con suo sipario che, quando non s'apre bene uno del pubblico sale sulla ribalta e lo appunta con uno spillo"[77]; with its "suggeritore sotto la cuffia […] Ma di certo le cuffie qualunque genere sono un passatismo, che in un teatro come questo non possono ammettersi"[78]; with its "enorme pilone, che vieta agli spettatori di destra di guardare a sinistra, a quelli di sinistra di guardare a destra" led the epoch's most powerful critic to make a rather biting summary observation on opening night:

> Per essere nuovo il teatro di Bragaglia è nuovo; non c'è che dire. Basti notare che, se il teatro antico era all'aperto, questo sta sottoterra; e che, se quello d'una volta si preoccupava d'assicurare a tutti gli spettatori la visibilità del palcoscenico, questo è congegnato in modo (e ce ne deve esser voluto!) che da quasi nessun punto della sala si possa veder bene il palcoscenico.[79]

It would take a very special crowd to appreciate all this, in other words: Bragaglia's theatre couldn't accommodate large audiences; but perhaps it wouldn't draw them, either. This, of course, marks a point of contrast with Pirandello and in part explains the variation in what each director was able to get from the Impresario. Pirandello, we know, did get the Argentina. Bragaglia did not. While for sure we know that this had to do with the type of establishment each of them ran – the police report indicated a sentiment of "unworthiness" in Bragaglia's case – it probably also had to do with numbers. Pirandello could, and would, fill the big theatres. Bragaglia, though he asked for them, didn't seem interested in that sort of public at all. This was certainly an element on Mussolini's mind when choosing his *disponbilità* toward the *coràgo* and his continued operations.

[77] d'Amico *Cronache,* cit., II.iii, p. 675.
[78] *Ivi*, I.ii, p. 252.
[79] *Ivi,* II.ii, p. 234.

Bragaglia's anti-bourgeois mindset undoubtedly appealed to the dictator. But he made no bones about his disinterest in the *popolo*. In the year leading up to the closure, the avant-gardist staunchly defended the exceptionality of his project in an article in *La Fiera Letteraria:*

> Lo sperimentale deve eternamente esperimentare e lo può soltanto per un pubblico specializzato. Non bisogna confondere il teatro popolare con quello sperimentale. […] Ho fatto appena un teatro *sperimentale*, per provare:
>
> 1) generi moderni: strade, o, almeno, sentieri nuovi;
> 2) esumazioni ancora viventi;
> 3) autori inediti (anche se giovanissimi) che destino interesse:
> 4) attori senza vizi di mestiere (preferibilmente che non abbiano mai recitato prima):
> 5) tecnica scenica nuova.
>
> […] Lo sperimentale degli Indipendenti è, per programma, alle elementari; e ci dovrà sempre restare, per non tradire la sua funzione di *studio*. Non presumerà mai d'essere definitivo e perfetto (ciò che si dice *d'arte*)[80]

When Mussolini had to make a decision, then, whether to help Bragaglia out, what would have urged him to do so? That the subterranean *dancing* created security problems; that Bragaglia may have been speaking badly of him; that his theatre sometimes resembled a house of ill repute, and it shocked people that fascism would sustain such a locale; that the theatre would appeal to a small group of elite? In the press, the theatre received a great deal of attention, which proved that it was a vital institution; but it was repeatedly noted that "questo teatro è fatto per intellettuali e per intelligenti,"[81] or that it was "una graziosa palestra di tentative raffinati e di piccolo bizzarrie ironiche."[82]

Without a doubt, the support Mussolini did give to Bragaglia, to Pirandello, and to many artists, came because he did view them as his vanguard. And Bragaglia had legitimate reason to hope that Mussolini would understand and appreciate his project, for in the oft-cited speech given at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia a few years earlier (in 1926), in which

[80] 13 January 1929, cited in Alberto Cesare Alberti, Sandra Bevere, and Paola Di Giulio, *Il Teatro Sperimentale degli Indipendenti (1923-1936)*, Bulzoni, Roma 1984, p. 59.
[81] Fausto Torrefranco, "Il primo spettacolo al Teatro degli Indipendenti," in *Il Nuovo Paese*, 19 January 1923, Cited in Alberti, *Il Teatro Sperimentale*, cit., p 80.
[82] d'Amico, *Cronache*, cit., II.i., p. 254.

he called for the creation of "l'arte fascista," the duce noted that the artistic patrimony of the Renaissance laid the right foundation for the rebirth of a great art "che può essere tradizionalista ed al tempo stesso moderna" [83]: a not uncommon point of view in the mid-twenties, but nonetheless one that would have resonated particularly with the author of *Il teatro teatrale, ossia il teatro.* And further, had it not been Mussolini to declare – this time in a speech less known to us – that "Tutti gli istituti d'arte, dal teatro al museo, dalla galleria all'accademia, debbono essere considerati come scuole, come luoghi cioè destinati non alla sola cultura e molto meno alla curiosità, ma preparati per educare il gusto e la sensibilità, per alimentare l'immaginazione…"? Yet, there was a sticking point in this same address, and, it seems to me, one that might well have delivered the death blow to the Indipendenti: "Così l'arte, sottratta ad esercitazioni troppo cerebraliste e pedanti […] e portata a contatto delle moltitudini […] costituirà una delle fonti perenni di vita per il popolo italiano." [84] But this wasn't what Bragaglia intended to do, and Mussolini knew it full well. With Pirandello, on the other hand, the possibility remained.

Simply put, if the duce didn't think the journals circulating underground at the Via degli Avignonesi were real weapons, he probably didn't think Bragaglia's *teatrino* was, either. The director evidently perceived this problem, for when he dedicated *Il teatro della rivoluzione* to Mussolini, and thus began it with an open letter to him, he urged, "Duce, all'armi! E non perché le armi nostre teatrali siano spade di cartone Voi non dovete prenderle sul serio. La spada dell'Arcangelo Gabriele non era di ferro!"[85] But, for Mussolini, as would become increasingly clear, cardboard swords were not the problem: Mussolini thought that the theatre was a very powerful weapon indeed. Cardboard swords, if they stirred the collective passions, were more than acceptable. Cardboard swords, if they could reach large numbers, were most desirable. In this, with respect to Pirandello, Bragaglia was clearly

[83] Mussolini, in *OO,* XXII, p. 230.
[84] Mussolini, "Per le associazioni artistiche," in *OO,* XX, p. 276.
[85] Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Il teatro della rivoluzione*, Roma: Edizioni Tiber, 1929, p. 13.

disadvantaged by his commitment to a little theatre project: he just didn't have the same sway. Bragaglia may have garnered the praise of all of Europe's avant-garde thespians, but he was no future Nobel laureate.

And so, Bragaglia's pleas and threats ("gli Indipendenti in dieci anni hanno fatto onore a Mussolini, il quali li ha volute"[86]; "ormai tutto l'estero sa che Bragaglia e Indipendenti sono un piccolo prodotto di Mussolini. Non possiamo morire miseramente,"[87] "non vogliamo affatto finire all'estero"[88]), didn't produce the emergency measures that would save the theatre's life, but only the financial support to help it die with dignity, paying off debts.

Bragaglia's suggestion in a letter to Beer, though it seems simply concerned with reputation, sheds some light on his thinking at the time. He wrote, in regards to the impending failure, that it would be possible to avoid scandal by liquidating creditors and saying "che la chiusura è voluta per dar luogo a una qualche trasformazione della nostra imprese artistica e teatrale."[89] In point of fact, this seems to have been the director's true desire, for he had been jockeying publicly and privately, for many months, for support from Mussolini Impresario that would finally bring him out from underground. For this reason, it's far less surprising that after the closure order Bragaglia wrote an appreciative letter to Beer in which he promised, "Ci ricorderemo sempre di ciò che il Duce ha fatto per l'Arte nuova."[90] Just the right thing to say for someone who was still awaiting windfall. Bragaglia's open letter is worth citing at length:

> Noi abbiamo inventato un teatro, abbiamo creato degli autori, abbiamo raccolto un pubblico ma, mentre tutto si trasforma e si evolve, non possiamo pensare di governarlo sempre da questo antro che ci fa allegri e feroci.
> Non si può chiamare Governo un reggimento di barricate.
> Eppure il Fascismo dovrà decidersi ad avere un suo Teatro.

[86] Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo*, cit., doc. 186, p. 250.
[87] *Ivi*, doc. 189, p. 252.
[88] In the same letter-dedication to Mussolini, Bragaglia, *Il teatro della rivoluzione*, cit., 1929, p. 8.
[89] Alberti, *Il teatro nel fascismo*, doc. 187, p. 251.
[90] *Ivi*, doc. 191, p. 252.

> Ogni grande civiltà ha avuto il suo teatro, ogni illuminato Principe ne ha avuto uno singolare, ogni epoca gloriosa possiede, in ogni paese, un glorioso capitolo teatrale.
> […] La rivoluzione fascista è anti-rivoluzionaria a teatro.
> Nessun uomo è stato cambiato: nessuna direttiva dell'epoca si è fatta strada in teatro, nell'Era Fascista; il Duce va a sentire la 'Norma' messa in iscena come al tempo di Belli, o la 'Traviata' come al tempo di Napoleone con la mosca. […]
> Duce, i barbari della Dacia incoronarono Poeta Ovidio, in esilio. Noi, se lo meritassimo, non avremmo nemmeno questa amare consolazione. Anche perchè non vogliamo affatto finire all'estero, e se non altro, per proseguire a non dar pace agli invecchiatori di questa giovanissima Italia.
> Qualcosa di simile alla amara fortuna di Ovidio è già avvenuto d'altronde ai miei poeti, perché mentre a Roma i professori ci cacciano in esilio sotto terra, ci seppelliscono vivi, si trova pure chi ci apprezzi, in questo esilio sotterraneo, mentre il mondo moderno straniero ci sostiene.
> Non con questo vogliamo dire che lo star sottoterra ci sia del tutto sgradito e per più ragioni. Esso non ci fa assistere a certe reincarnazioni e al perpetuo trionfo delle camorre tradizionaliste. 'Meglio il sonno e l'esser di sasso' diceva Michelangelo. Meglio far qui, per ora, che l'esser spettatori altrove.
> Ma V.E. non vorrà farci morire di reumatismi nelle cantine di casa sua. Ci sono tanti altri palcoscenici al sole! Rome è ricca di santità e di chiare acque, ma non manca di teatri e belli.
> La nostra fedeltà è immensa, come la Vostra generosità e il Vostro amore dell'Arte. Datecene la possibilità, e noi vi faremo il Teatro originale che occorre all'Era della Rivoluzione Fascista. […]
> Oggi non basta il solo incoraggiamento e il sostegno dello 'Sperimentale.' Oltre a difendere il laboratorio tecnico, noi vogliamo ora dare il definitivo al popolo, senza esser costretto al tentativo commerciale, pur di fare anche noi qualche cosa in grande. L'arte in generale non si fa senza protezione: l'arte antitradizionale, fatta fuori del covo rivoluzionario, si può solo con la forze del Regime.
> Il nostro radicalismo ci ha sollevato contro un mondo di nemici che sperava, in un primo tempo, di trovare in noi dei rivoluzionari accomodanti. Ma Voi non consentirete che noi restiamo vittime proprio dell'esser rivoluzionari. […]
> Ma, per volontà del Destino, da otto anni il Teatro Indipendente della Rivoluzione è a' Vostri piedi, e per volontà vostra riesce a difendersi e a vivere.
> Ogni fortuna da Voi ci è venuta e ogni speranza nostra è ancora in Voi.
> Fateci, O Duce, uscire da queste catacombre [sic] di credenti e fate trionfare la Fede![91]

And though such a letter might even prompt us to wonder if Mussolini let the Teatro degli Indipendenti close also because he didn't like Bragaglia's attitude in declaring fascism's non-revolution, in a surprise, in 1937, the Impresario gave the *coràgo* what he

[91] Bragaglia, *Il teatro della rivoluzione*, cit., pp. 6-14.

desired: he was appointed director of the Teatro delle Arti, an experimental theatre run under the auspices of the National Confederation of Fascist Unions of Professionals and Artists and housed on its premises on Via Sicilia. In the meantime, Bragaglia he had been nominated to the directorship of the Theatre Unions and named Commissioner of the Directors and Scenic Workers Union, and when the Confederation began programming their new headquarters in 1933, his request that they install a theatre with exposition space in the foyers instead of a projected conference room was well received. He was first appointed to oversee the technical aspects of the new construction, and then named director of the new theatre, which was conceived as an experimental studio for young directors, designers and of course authors, whose works would be staged: the training ground he had been clamoring for; completely funded by various State offices; a *Sperimentale dello Stato*, finally, after all those years. Anton Giulio Bragaglia, at last, came up from underground. His theatre would, at last, have a place in the sun.

In many ways, the Arti closely resembled the Indipendenti in terms of its mission: it would present classic Italian authors in new ways, introduce the new generation's talents, and import the best in foreign drama.[92] In addition to Bragaglia, names like Giorgio Venturini and Corrado Pavolini appeared on the directors' list, and such personalities as Antonio Valente and Enrico Prampolini designed. Moreover, the theatre occasionally hosted the shows produced by the Teatro Sperimentale of the Florentine GUF,[93] an indication that it truly would act as the laboratory Bragaglia had spoken of, making way for the young as the director had always stressed was important for the theatre's vitality and, now, as the fascist slogan "*largo ai giovani*" called for.

[92] For the story of the Teatro delle Arti and a full list of its repertoire, see Giovanni Calendoli, *Il teatro delle arti*, cit.; Francesca Vigna, *Il 'corago sublime': Anton Giulio Bragaglia e il Teatro delle Arti,* Rubbettino, Soverio Mannelli 2008. The theatre's activities was heavily covered by magazines of the epoch – *Scenario* especially – as well, so access to quality first-hand materials is likewise possible.

[93] The Gruppi Universitari Fascisti sponsored various cultural activities, including film and theatre groups. The Florentine GUF had the only "Sperimentale," however, and was notable for this.

For all of these reasons, the Teatro delle Arti deserves as much attention – from an aesthetic point of view – as the Indipendenti.[94] In fact, its ongoing commitment to avant-gardism and in particular to a foreign repertory is even more laudable given the moment in which it operated: in the war years, when more than ever popular entertainment dominated the scene and fascist censorship regulations clamped down on foreign works.[95] From 1935 onward, prohibitions increased: first, after the sanctions imposed on Italy for the Ethiopian campaign, works by authors from sanctioning countries were banned (with some exceptions for French drama and greats like Shakespeare and Shaw); after the 1938 alliance with Hitler, any play casting a bad light on Germans was to rejected; from June of 1940 Jews or their works were to remain off the boards; when Italy entered World War II, plays by authors from enemy nations were outcast.[96] This notwithstanding, the Teatro delle Arti's repertoire, though including an abundance of Italian playwrights, could still boast the names of nearly thirty foreign authors – American, English, Spanish, Russian, French… Bragaglia is credited with introducing Federico Garcia Lorca to Italian audiences with his production of *Blood Wedding*, making Eugene O'Neill a presence in Italy with six different shows, and two of the most acclaimed performances were Thorton Wilder's magisterial *Our Town* and an evening of three Japanese classics directed by Corrado Pavolini,[97] both in the 1939 season (before the

[94] Calendoli rightly points out that the Teatro delle Arti has been largely neglected in studies of Bragaglia's career and merits further study not just as a coda but as an integral part of the artist's career: having survived seven years, it in fact comprised a substantial part of his repertoire.

[95] Calendoli argues that the vast predominance in Italian works in these years cannot be blamed on censorship laws alone but also on the increased industrialization of the theatre, where the choices left to *capocomici* and *impresari* were determined by larger forces that determined what plays were importable goods. Royalties for foreign works tended to be quite expensive as well, another factor that surely pushed companies toward native drama. See also Emanuela Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale*, and for a particularly interesting case study of Hungarian comedies on the Italian stage, Antonella Ottai, *Eastern. La commedia ungherese sulle scene italiane fra le due guerre*, Bulzoni, Roma 2010. Pirandello's opinion on the sanctions was interesting; from his point of view, they were a benefit to Italian drama, which was unfairly treated by producers and public alike: it wasn't the dearth of quality Italian plays that was the problem (as the common argument stated) but the overabundance of companies – many of which were comprised of sub-par actors and actresses – that created an insufficience of native works to be produced. See letter 360106 in *Lettere a Marta Abba*, cit., pp. 1271-73.

[96] For censorship laws, which will in any case be discussed in chapter four, see *Censura teatrale e fascismo (1931-1944). La storia, l'archivio, l'inventario.* ed. Patrizia Ferrara, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Roma 2004, introduction, pp. 3-107.

[97] Corrado and Alessandro Pavolini were the sons of a well-known scholar of Asian culture.

war would have discouraged the former but encouraged the latter). Despite it all, in other words, the Arti's repertoire was "un vera e propria antologia di aggiornamento teatrale unica per la sua varietà, per la sua spregiudicatezza, per il suo equilibrio."[98]

And yet, safely under the wing of the State corporative system, the theatre's administrative powers were the regime's hierarchs, and this would have both a real and perceived effect on its operations. One of the first indications of this new relationship of Bragaglia with the powers that be was his submission of the list of possible inaugural performances sent to the duce so that he could choose the show to be performed. Mussolini left the choice to Alessandro Pavolini, President of the Confederation of Professionals and Artists and on April 21, 1937, the Teatro delle Arti opened its doors with Alfieri's *La finestrina,* directed by Bragaglia with set design by the futurist Prampolini. And when Alessandro Pavolini was appointed Minister of Popular Culture in 1939, this was seen as an auspicious sign by the journal *Il Dramma* because he "ha dato vita e impulso a quel *Teatro delle Arti* che ha rappresentato in questi ultimi anni alcune delle cose più interessanti delle letterature teatrale di ogni paese." If the government was finally ready to define its artistic charter under the new Minister ("l'uomo che ci vuole"), the Arti was the answer: though a State theatre was still a question for the future, in the meantime a State company like Bragaglia's that also took the best authors, actors, directors, and designers around the peninsula "potrebbe figurare degnamente tra le migliori manifestazioni della nostra vita artistica."[99] In other words, the Teatro delle Arti was a *sperimentale* for Bragaglia, to test new works and new ways of theatre-making, and for the regime, as a laboratory for the long-awaited State theatre.

And, indeed, the theatre was a battle ground for some of Fascism's toughest issues when it came to the theatrical arts. How would it balance aesthetic demands with political

[98] Calendoli, *Il teatro delle Arti*, cit., p. 57.
[99] Sante Savarino, 'Il nuovo ministro della cultura popolare e il teatro," *Il Dramma* 318 (15 November 1939), p. 18.

ones? The interests of the men of the theatre with the needs of regime officials? On paper, the conflicts were bound to be formidable; but with Pavolini and Mussolini in the middle, they played out in surprising and even contradictory ways. Bragaglia on his own was a complicated case: on one hand, he had always seemed a fierce nationalist and loyal enough fascist, and his dedication to reviving the Italian dramatic tradition while also encouraging the best and brightest of the new generation was right in line with all that the regime could desire from a theatre bearing its name. On the other, he was the single greatest champion not just of international exchange (in and of itself not a problem, for fascism's border closing when it comes to the theatre has been exaggerated, excepting the war-time censorship regulations) but in particular of contemporary American dramatists – and American culture – was already problematic in the thirties and especially troubling during the war.

Complications in fact arose for the director when it came to his repertory. No one could accuse the Fascists of not being pragmatic, however, and a series of loopholes were found for Bragaglia, for instance, when he wanted to put his great American discovery Eugene O'Neill on the stage. The Nazis' recasting of Shakespeare as a Nordic artist in order to perform him on the German boards is legendary; here we have a no less amusing declaration that O'Neill, given that his father James was born in Ireland, was himself also Irish and not American – therefore not an enemy, and therefore presentable on fascist stages.[100] But more generally, as a man who had for years heralded great new works regardless of their origins, Bragaglia was concerned with the actions taken against foreign dramatists and took the opportunity to speak out against them in a 1941parliamentary session (he had become Consigliere della Camera e delle Corporazione and thus a deputy in parliament). As recounted by journalist Mario La Rosa, he was not well received, but his *deus ex machina* appeared in the form of Mussolini himself: Bragaglia had to fight to keep

[100] On Shakespeare in Nazi Germany, see Rodney Symington, *The Nazi Appropriation of Shakespeare. Cultural Politics in the Third Reich,* Mellen, Lewiston, NY 2005. On O'Neill and The Teatro delle Arti, see Calendoli, *Il teatro delle Arti*, cit., and Leopoldo Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit.

the floor, greeted as he was by hostile shouting, but when he overpowered his opponents and concluded his discourse with the observation that "se in America non avessero eseguiti più melodrammi italiani per rappresaglia, dopo tutto ci avremmo rimesso noi," it was Mussolini who began to applaud, provoking all the others to immediately change their attitude and do the same.[101]

Minister Pavolini was another ally for the director, as best demonstrated by his complicity in the staging of the American dramatist Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* in December of 1941. The play, first staged in New York in 1939 starring Tallulah Bankhead, tells the story of a group of malicious, greedy siblings whose schemes for financial gain push them to theft, blackmail, and practically murder. The Italian public was well familiar with "queste famiglie American scriteriate, strambe, pazze," reviewer Gigi Michelotti commented, but "questa degli Isaacs […] non è soltanto stramba: è losca. Una famiglia nella quale sono state cacciate persone di altro stampo, e che non sono certo della razza degli altri, tanto sono diverse e spaesate." He then goes on the describe the characters: the villains of the family saga being the siblings Solomone, Samuele, and Rebecca. All of this will sound about right to anyone familiar with Hellman's script… except the names. Solomon, Samuel, and Rebecca Isaacs? A Jewish Family? In Bragaglia's version, yes; in Hellman's, no. *This,* most ironically, was Bragaglia's strategy for getting around one small detail when it came to censorship regulations: not only was Hellman American, she was Jewish. When the censor kindly informed Bragaglia that he was in a difficult position, for raising the issue with his superiors would surely displease the director, Bragaglia took this as his cue to go directly to Pavolini. And thus he obtained the *nulla osta.*

The censor lets us in on some backstage maneuvering, though. This wasn't merely a clever little trick of Bragaglia's (if it were, its motivations could only be guessed at…); on the

[101] Mario La Rosa, *Mussolini sconosciuto,* ADI, Roma 1991, p. 138.

contrary, it was part of a broader plan for a new propagandistic theatre that Pavolini himself had been dreaming up (strangely, as the Minister usually had the right idea when it came to theatrical practice).[102] He had in fact planned a conference for August of that year to discuss the possibilities for a propaganda theatre that would both exalt fascist Italy and denigrate its democratic enemies; Marinetti and Bragaglia were two of the invited participants, and though the conference never happened (the duce's son Bruno was killed in a plane crash on the eve of the gathering), a committee for political theatre was formed, and Pavolini asked the censor to furnish a list of plays that would serve their purposes. The censor suggested that satirical pieces written by playwrights from the nations in question were obvious choices. And *voilà,* Lillian Hellman's nasty crew became Jews.

If, as it has been suggested, Bragaglia had "maggior libertà a Roma, nella sua sala rivolta ad un pubblico ristretto di 600 spettatori, mentre in *tournée* fosse maggiormente controllato," an idea substantiated by the censor's memoires,[103] this presumed special treatment renders Bragaglia's choices even more disturbing. Moreover, despite Calendoli's argument that the director "non si lascia condizionare dal codice della politica vigente," it's clear that fascism began to cast long shadows over Bragaglia's production. The Teatro delle Arti, then, became a fascist laboratory is some troubling ways. But as regards Bragaglia, his success, as we have seen, only increased over the years; he would in fact go on to prosper after the war. If in 1934 it had been possible for an informant to say, "Anche nel campo di teatro il Bragaglia non è una forza vera e propria, ma un individuo che prova, tenta, ricopiando in qua ed in là senza alcun risultato che lasci un ricordo vero e proprio di cosa fatta bene, bene riuscita, e che possa essere presa come esempio,"[104] the judgment made of him in *Il dramma* (which appeared alongside a photo of Bragaglia's face), at the height of his Teatro delle Arti success, was quite another:

[102] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., pp. 296-98.
[103] This is the suggestion of Gianfranco Pedullà, *Il teatro italiano*, cit., p. 327.
[104] 19 February 1934, ACS MI PolPol Anton Giulio Bragaglia

> Anton Giulio Bragaglia si avvia verso l'immortalità: una maschera simile non può far pensare ad altro. Pure ci sovviene un altro ritratto di Bragaglia: baffi a virgola, tubino calato sulla fronte, occhi sarcastici e sospettosi, sciarpa di lana verde al collo, cappotto col bavero rialzato anche alla tavola di lavoro e una lunga forbice in mano con la quale si tagliava i peli nel naso; era il Bragaglia degli 'Indipendenti' che sembrava fasciato di tela juta e sempre inzuppato d'acqua che trasudava dai muri, nei sotterranei di via degli Avignonesi, al 'Teatro degli Indipendenti.' Qualche anno è passato: ora Bragaglia ha un grande e bellissimo teatro, già famoso in tutta Europa: il 'Teatro delle Arti' che egli dirige con quella sapienza che nessuno gli può negare, con quella passione per il teatro che è rimasta intatta a non più di tre o quattro di noi. Anton Giulio è dunque proprio bravo: questa maschera che gli abbiamo fatta, se la merita.[105]

With the fall of fascism and the disaster of the war, the Teatro delle Arti was forced to close its doors on March 15, 1943. The director returned to his studies and spent the war years writing; after the conflict had ended, he resumed the life of a Jack-of-all trades, directing, writing as a critic, making some films for the Istituto Luce, and even founding a theatre (the Piccolo of Bari). In 1948, more than one hundred theatre artists and intellectuals published an appeal to Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti in *La fiera letteraria*, asking that the direction of the Teatro delle Arti be restored to Anton Giulio Bragaglia. No action was taken. Yet Bragaglia was not without honors; just after the war, he was invited by Unesco to represent Italy at its international theatre conventions, and in 1959, he was elected president of the Associazione nazionale registi e scenografi. He died in 1960. The "Teatro delle Arti" sign remains on the abandoned theatre in Via Sicilia today.

*

It would seem that poor Bontempelli's fears for Pirandello's legacy were unfounded: the *capocomico* may not be present in our memories, but the dramatist left his definitive stamp, in the form of texts we can still pick up and read today. Bragaglia's work as a *coràgo*, though, has suffered for its ephemerality. Today, outside of specialist circles, he is completely forgotten. But for a moment we must reflect on their commonality: on their

[105] "Un critico alla volta," *Il Dramma*. 300 (15 February 1939), p. 34.

shared spearheading of a desired theatrical revolution that was both won and lost. Italian theatre historians have recognized their decisive contribution to the birth of the director. Gianfranco Pedullà in fact suggests that they were the only two men in the Italy of the mid-30s that could call themselves directors.[106] If this is the case, it is hardly a coincidence that they were the two men who received consistent and substantial support from Mussolini and his regime: even if, as we have seen, these contributions fell short of the *coràgo*'s, and especially the *capocomico*'s, desires.

This failure of the State – for, despite all the regime did, it was certainly a failure for the art theatre of the *ventennio* – however, needs to be contextualized. More specifically, Mussolini and the regime's very real contributions to the development of twentieth century theatre should be acknowledged: oddly enough, when it came to dramatic art, of the art (as opposed to popular) theatre, fascism contributed far more to the future than it did to the present. First, Pirandello. Second, the *teatro di regia.*

We must consider for a moment Pirandello's impact abroad. From the start, international exchange was at the heart of the Teatro degli Undici's program; like Bragaglia, Pirandello imported foreign innovators. In its three seasons the theatre produced fifteen world premieres and at least nine foreign plays – mainly Irish, English, French, and Russian – for the first time in Italy. At the same time, the exportation of Italian drama was high on the list of priorities. Pirandello's tours abroad made him an undisputed international success. He was

[106] Pedullà, *Il teatro italiano,* cit., p. 184. Franca Angelina also dedicates a section of her *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Novecento* (Laterza, Roma 1988) to the nascent art of directing under their auspices. The question is a vexed one, however. Claudio Meldolesi's *Fondamenti del teatro italiano*, demonstrates what seems to be the still politically delicate task of confronting the fascist regime's contribution to the Italian theatre. The author suggests that changes in theatrical practice in the thirties happened because fascism "destroyed theatrical memory" – it was a negative, destructive force rather than an innovative one. It is in fact only in a footnote buried on pg. 103 of the study that he acknowledges that it was not the "generation of directors" his book focuses on that were the "founders" of Italian directing, but Bragaglia, d'Amico, and perhaps to a lesser extent Pirandello. Mirella Schino, in *La nascita della regia teatrale*, (Laterza, Roma 2003), gives no importance to the Italian case, and in a more recent article addresses the issue by offering a history of the term "*regia*," which began to be used in 1932, and the increasing professionalization of the activity in the second decade of the *ventennio*; Schino attaches the developments in this period more to the "ossessione organizzativa" of the fascist mentality than to an artistically-led revolution of the art (so much so, that the title of her article is "Storia di una parola. Fascismo e mutamenti di mentalità teatrale." In *Teatro e Storia*, XXV.32 (2011), pp. 169-212.

obviously already a star, but the Teatro d'Arte tours secured the longevity and depth of his reputation beyond the Alps, and especially overseas. *Six Characters* had already played in fourteen countries, with major productions in London, New York, Paris, and Berlin between 1922 and 1924, but it was the clamorous new version of the play developed in the Odescalchi that made the play the legend it is today. Reviewing the 1925 London performances, Francis Birrell commented that few people in England had heard of Pirandello two years earlier, for English actors had failed to reveal him for what he was, "one of the most brilliant play-makers […] that have appeared in Europe."[107] In other words, in the context of the duce's support for the Teatro d'Arte, we have to recognize that Luigi Pirandello, *capocomico*, is the world's Pirandello today not wholly despite, but even in part because of, Benito Mussolini.

Additionally, Mussolini's early support for the vanguard projects of Italy's first two directors signals a curious post-war development: the rise and absolute predominance of the *teatro di regia* in the *secondo novecento*. The Impresario's backing of the little theatres attests to his interest in modern, anti-bourgeois theatre practice. But, as we've seen, both projects were in some ways tied to the larger ambitions for the construction of a State apparatus of some sort. For Pirandello, this was an unrealized ambition: the National Prose Theatre he dreamed of never came into being. And yet, his clamoring for a National apparatus would not fall on deaf ears. One of Pirandello's allies in this fight was the critic Silvio d'Amico; while d'Amico, too, was interested in the creation of a State theatre, his greatest desire was the foundation of Dramatic Arts Academy designed not only to train technicians and actors, but to allow for the real birth of the director. This school was erected by the State, in 1936. Post-war Italian theatre is hailed for its directing: its heroes are Giorgio Strehler and Luca Ronconi. The development of directing as the supreme art of Italian theatre

[107] Cit. in Jennifer Lorch and Susan Bassnet, *Luigi Pirandello in the Theatre*. Routledge, London 1993, p. 117.

under their (left-wing) auspices was not the result of a liberation from the fascist *ventennio*, though, but instead the full flourishing of one of its most important theatrical achievements.

At the same time, this exact achievement of the *second novecento* points us to fascism's failure to revolutionize the dramatic theatre in its own time. We will recall Pirandello's suspicion toward the director as a figure who would potentially diminish the importance of the dramatic text and the actor's relationship to the characters painstakingly created therein. The triumph of the director's theatre would have chagrinned the Maestro because it did just what he feared: if authors like Pirandello, Bontempelli, Rosso di San Secondo, or Alberto Savinio represented a dynamic production of dramatic literature in the 1920s, such a rich decade has never again been seen. Dramaturgy has taken a back seat to spectacle, and this began already in the 1930s. The reasons in the 1930s was different than they are today; then, it wasn't yet because the director had triumphed, but because Mussolini and the regime began to distribute their resources differently.

Until fascism's fall, Mussolini and the regime continued to support the prose theatre. There were a series of awards and special funds that the Ministry of Popular Culture and Mussolini himself could give to companies deemed to be deserving. But the duce and his hierarchs decisively shifted their attention away from the art theatre: yes, there was the Teatro delle Arti, and, yes, the plans for the State theatre went forward at least until Pirandello's death. (There are a lot of "ifs": if Pirandello hadn't died, if the war hadn't come, would the Teatro di Stato have come into being? Would Bragaglia have received the directorship of the "Sperimentale dello Stato"?)

In any case, an elite art theatre wasn't the way of fascism of the 1930s, for the "recite popolari" Pirandello scoffed at captured the imagination not only of Mussolini but also of key players like Bontempelli, and governmental monies were increasingly diverted toward those spectacles. And yet, evidence simply doesn't bear out the oft-repeated claim that Mussolini

only feigned interest in high theatrical art while he courted the likes of Pirandello. However, it does show that his priorities shifted. This shift will be discussed in the conclusion.

Chapter Four: Mussolini the Censor

La censura a quell'opera la farò io.
- Mussolini

The censorship method ... is that of handing the job over to some frail and erring mortal man, and making him omnipotent on the assumption that his official status will make him infallible and omniscient.
- G.B. Shaw

By now the pages are yellowed and tattered, the folders containing them a humid and faded blue, but 12,955 scripts sit in Rome's Central State Archives yet today. They are what remain of the nearly 18,000 play texts submitted to the fascist regime's censorship office in hopes of receiving the visa authorizing public performance. Many obtained this clearance with ease, as the stamps on their title pages declare: "*nulla osta alla rappresentazione*"; the same impress on others is completed with a miniscule, immaculately handwritten note, "*con i tagli apportati*." Others still bear traces of a more complex process: pages and pages bloodied by the red (or blue) grease pencil that struck out lines, changed words, bracketed off exchanges, or even crossed out entire scenes. The most troublesome scripts had attached to them a two- or three- page type-written report summarizing the plot, describing the characters, highlighting the pitfalls they contained and reasoning on whether therefore the play ought to be authorized. The evaluator would send his reports on high; occasionally they would come back with a "sì" or a "la censura faccia quello che crede," but most often they would return to him with a gigantic, cursive "NO," firmly underlined, and signed with the unmistakable three vertical lines that formed the duce's signature M. The evaluator was the Neapolitan vice-prefect Leopoldo Zurlo, a bow-tied and bespectacled man of fifty-six; from the time censorship was centralized in 1931 until the fall of regime in 1943, it was he – along with the Boss – to decide which plays would make it to the stage.

"Mi parve di tornare da morte a vita," Zurlo would later recall, looking back on the moment – the evening of June 29, 1931 – when he was told that the Chief of Police, Arturo Bocchini, planned to entrust theatrical censorship to him. Zurlo had been a vice-prefect under

the liberal government before Mussolini's rise to power and, in part for this reason, he suspected, had repeatedly been passed over for promotion. At his age, and in the wake of a changing of the fascist Ministerial guard, he feared this was about to happen yet again. He would have preferred retirement to being short-shrifted once more, yet any attempts to change his position – putting himself at the mercy of the Undersecretary of State, for instance – risked landing him in some province far from Rome: a move he wished to avoid at all costs. The appointment was a saving grace.

Relief turned almost immediately to trepidation, though, when vice-chief of police Carmine Senise told him that he wouldn't be part of a commission, but *the* person whose judgment would effectively determine whether a play would receive the visa; the law called for a panel, but preferring consistency and efficiency, Chief Bocchini decided to appoint Zurlo alone to the task. He wasn't sure he was up to it. He came from a well-to-do liberal Neapolitan home, and as a child he had heard his "*liberalona*" grandmother deride the Bourbon and Papal censors; he had grown up believing in freedom of expression; he had essentially considered censorship a political tool. Plus – and this was hardly an irrelevant detail – he was no fascist. But Bocchini knew that Zurlo "aveva letto qualche libro in più," and for him it stood to reason that a cultured, honest, and diligent non-fascist was a better choice than a blackshirt zealot.[1] So, Zurlo it was: the white wavy-haired, bow-tied and bespectacled Zurlo, the duce's trusted right hand.

How had it all come about? When Mussolini became Prime Minister in 1922, preventive theatrical censorship was already the norm in Italy, as it had been in the various territories prior to unification in 1871. Despite lively debates on censorship's acceptability in a modern, liberal State, it was ultimately deemed a necessary antidote to the theatre's

[1] Mussolini didn't go to great lengths to fascistize the police force, so Zurlo wasn't unique in this. On management of the police force and its relation to the party and fascist militia, see Salvatore Lupo, *Il fascismo. La politica in un regime totalitario,* Donzelli, Roma 2005 (2000). Zurlo recounts his experiences in *Memorie,* cit.

diseducative potential. Censorship under the Savoys had initially been overseen by the Ministry of the Interior but in 1864 was delegated to local prefectures, partly because it was thought that a play's threat to public order in a particular place could best be determined by local officials. In unified Italy, this power remained in their hands.

In the late liberal era, the future duce had had quite a bit to say about the matter, though as a journalist and politician, he was mainly concerned about the press. From the pages of *Il Popolo d'Italia*, in 1917 – in an article itself censored in several places – he had castigated the government for turning censorship into a "strumento di reazione politica" and especially for its inconsistency. While the censor would turn a blind eye to attacks on many, Mussolini observed, soon-to-be Prime Minister (and then Minister of the Interior) Vittorio Emanuele Orlando was off limits. This sort of censorship was "una limitazione. Una violenza" – completely inappropriate in a political system with a pretense to democracy.[2] In 1920, the title of yet another article summed it up: "Abolite la censura!" Again Mussolini objected to inequality. This time, he noted not only that "we" (he, or *The Popolo d'Italia*) were targets more than anyone else, but also that the strictness of regulations varied from one location to the next. He was particularly riled about the banning of information regarding international relations: "Evidentemente, non è pensabile la censura senza un elemento di grottesco stupidità," he wrote, but in a truly democratic society, the government couldn't give in to such stupidity; it couldn't withhold information from the public who expected and needed to be informed. Abolish censorship, then![3]

As duce, Mussolini re-centralized theatrical censorship in 1931, partially at the request of Italy's nomadic producers who were frustrated and exhausted by differing standards from one prefecture to the next. We have to imagine that the ex-journalist was sympathetic to their plight, having so often taken aim at the liberal government on these same

[2] Mussolini, *OO*, ed. IX, pp. 157-158 (Article dated September 2, 1917).
[3] *Ivi*, XIV, pp. 240-41 (Article dated 10 January 1920).

grounds. Now he presumably had few qualms about the stupidity of censorship – his government didn't pretend to be democratic – but he did evidently want to avoid the problems that discrepancies and inefficiency created. Theatrical censorship remained the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior (essentially, the police force) and, as the duce held that Ministry as his own, he was Leopoldo Zurlo's superior and chief interlocutor.

Fascism's most radical break with liberal practices came, therefore, not in the matter but in the means, for even if centralization surely resulted in greater consistency and therefore rigor, the actual criteria for *what* was to be censored changed very little when – after nearly nine years in power – Mussolini finally brought censorship under his direct supervision. From the start, the censor's principal task had been the safeguarding of morality; protecting religious sentiment came in a close second, while politics were said to be a more distant third, even if respect for high officials was paramount and subversive plays were often struck down. (In the Savoy's kingdom, for example, plays about the Republican revolutionary and eventual hero of the Risorgimento Giuseppe Garibaldi were consistently suppressed.)[4] In the Mussolini – Zurlo era, the basic guidelines wouldn't change much at all, since the law delineating them, number 146 of June 18, 1931, was only a slight modification of past legislation, as Zurlo's *Memorie inutili* show:

> sieno proibite le opere contrarie alla morale – ai buoni costumi – all'ordine pubblico – alle legge – ai principi costituitivi della famiglia – al sentimento religioso – apologetiche del vizio o del delitto. / Che sieno proibite inoltre le opera perturbatrici dei rapporti internazionali – ispiratrici di avversione tra le classi sociali – offensive per il Re e per il Pontefice pei Sovrani esteri, per il decoro e il prestigio delle Autorità, dei Militari, degli Agenti di P.S. – offensiva per la vita privata delle persone – relative infine a fatti nefandi che abbiano commossa la pubblica opinione.

[4] As a matter of fact, in an 1862 list of prohibited stage plays, twenty-nine of thirty were texts about the Risorgimento hero. Patrizia Ferrara, introduction to *Censura teatrale e fascismo*, cit., p. 9. Garibaldi was an incredibly popular figure for representation in narrative and dramatic works, both in Italy and abroad; while many of the suppressed dramas in 1862 centered on political events, the general tendency was to depoliticize the figure and even turn him into a sexualized, romantic hero. See Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi. Invention of a Hero*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2007. (*Garibaldi. L'invenzione di un eroe*, Laterza, Roma 2007.)

The cautious legislator who had designed the regulations, in short, had concluded that the censor was to prohibit "tutto quanto possa essere ritenuto di danno o di pericolo pubblico."[5]

For good citizen Zurlo, whose upbringing was founded on a Catholic morality and respect for the State that employed his family members, the problem didn't lie in the principles themselves or in their vastness and generality, but in the lack of guidance on how, exactly, to carry them out: "Di come tali norme debbano essere applicate non una parola…" he would lament.[6] And, indeed, the nearly thirteen years of his employment in this post were an ongoing trial by fire. His deliberations, in any case, resulted in one of three actions: approving the text (when necessary, with changes made by him or discussed with the author), rejecting it, or "suspending" it, which meant sending it off to the archives without ruling or even notifying the interested party of the decision. This last option was selected when any determination would be considered too "sensitive" – a strategy that amounted to ignoring the problem and hoping it would just go away, and if it didn't, coming up with cleverly evasive responses to inquiries.

In the face of such difficulties, Zurlo would bring many talents to his task – an extraordinary literary background, acute intelligence, a strong sense of ironic humor, vast amounts of stamina and patience – and would also seek advice anywhere he could find it. A mere two months after arriving in office, in September of 1931, for instance, he wrote to none other than Silvio d'Amico, appealing to his kindness, as they did not know each other personally, merely explaining that he wished to see him, having need, "per ragioni di ufficio, di alcune notizie in materia teatrale."[7] When plays contained questionable depictions of soldiers, he contacted military colleagues and ask for a reaction to the image presented; or when, in not uncommon instances, delicate matters in terms of Catholic morality or Church

[5] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 9.
[6] *Ibidem*.
[7] Letter from Leopoldo Zurlo to Silvio d'Amico, September 19, 1931. MBAG, Fondo Silvio d'Amico, Correspondence, b. Zurlo.

politics arose, he turned to acquaintances in the Vatican.[8] Eventually, his points of reference in the Ministry itself expanded: when his office was transferred to the Undersecretary, then Ministry, of Press and Propaganda in 1935, Mussolini's son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano (ex-theatre critic, to boot) became Zurlo's superior; when this institution became the infamous Ministry of Popular Culture (MinCulPop) and the State theatrical apparatus was broadly expanded, Zurlo would work with the new ministers (Dino Alfieri from 1937-1939, then Alessandro Pavolini and Gaetano Polverelli), and Director General of Theatre Nicola De Pirro. This changed his process quite a bit; whereas in the first years Bocchini had acted as go-between for him and the duce, taking no interest in their discussions, the hierarchs had desires and opinions of their own, and increasingly often Zurlo would report to them, rather than to the Capo.

And yet, the habit of turning to Mussolini would stick, especially when it came to plays that seemed to somehow speak of him, even if only by analogy: throughout the *ventennio*, the Censor-in-Chief (or "Censore Supremo," as Guido Bonsaver has called him) would remain Mussolini.[9] As has been oft-reported, the duce was evidently quite fond of Zurlo's erudite and witty memoranda, which were the basis of a relationship for the two collaborators who met face-to-face only once or twice. "In fondo i collaboratori di uno scritto sono due: chi scrive e chi riceve," Zurlo would later reflect, "ed io che scrivevo per una sola

[8] Zurlo makes various references to such encounters, but see also Pasquale Iaccio, *La scena negata. Il teatro vietato durante la guerra fascista (1940-1943)*, Bulzoni, Roma 2004, p. 25.

[9] Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2007, p. 58. In *Censura teatrale*, cit., Ferrara provides an in-depth analysis of Zurlo's career and his collaboration with Mussolini and the other hierarchs, noting that Galeazzo Ciano would become – and remain – the censor's chief interlocutor once the censorship office moved to his Ministry; she specifies, however, that Mussolini would still be consulted, especially in cases where characters (Caesar, Napoleon, etc.) could be likened to Mussolini, at least in the spectators' eyes (p.42). We'll see in this chapter other examples of the duce's ongoing participation in censorship affairs. From Zurlo's memoirs and archival documents, though, it is also clear that the later Ministers and De Pirro, the Director General of Theatre, were consulted, and, as the others had done, acted as go-between for Zurlo and the duce. It should also be noted that Zurlo, who rather quickly obtained his promotion to Prefect and in the 1940s would for a time becoming acting Director General in De Pirro's stead, worked with ever-increasing autonomy. Zurlo also had a secretary, Vincenzo Sarno, and an archivist, Mariano Accinni.

persona ho dovuto assumere in alcuni casi un tono di sicurezza ben lontano dai miei gusti,"[10] a comment that speaks volumes about how they worked together. Though he would gain tremendous confidence and authority over time, his first years in office were formative: even if he went to the duce less frequently in later years, their initially tight tie set the precedent for rulings throughout Zurlo's tenure. Much of what we know about their relationship comes from Zurlo's memoirs. And while the book must be read – in part – as a self-defense, available archival documents and testimonies from the epoch generally corroborate the prefect's depiction of himself and his working process with the duce and other hierarchs. One of the *Memorie*'s most fascinating revelations is that the execution of Zurlo's task – at least as he chose to fulfill it – essentially required reading Mussolini's mind. In many cases, the prefect's exercising of his own authority was the executing of what he perceived to be the Boss' will. In others, he employed an acute perceptivity in attempts to influence Mussolini's thinking on the issue at hand or to guide him to a certain verdict. This required appealing to his common sense, political savvy, good humor, or even benevolence. Rarely a simple task.

In Enemy Territory: the USSR, England, and France

Indeed. "Caddi dalle nuvole," Zurlo would write about the duce's asking him to examine an innocuous old piece already playing at the Argentina: *Beyond the Ocean*, by Jacob Gordin, a Ukranian-born American playwright (and reformer of the Yiddish stage). But, come to think of it, he had been noticing a trend:

The Last of the Tzars? No.

The Enemy, from a Nihilist novel? No.

The Man of the Future, a satire of communism? No.

Anything having to do with Rasputin? NO!

[10] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 6.

The Boss simply didn't want Russian subjects. As far as Zurlo was concerned, this was "una fobia." But it was Mussolini's phobia, and so "No Russian Subjects" would stand as a guiding principle. And yet, guiding principles were one thing; hard and fast rules were another. Fascist foreign relations had no small impact on the censorship process: enemies of the State could also be enemies of the stage, to varying degrees. The representation of these enemies was at times closely monitored, at times barred wholesale (at least in theory). The same was true of dramaturgical production from the nations in question: especially in the war years, blanket bans on enemy nations' plays were declared, even if not always rigorously enforced. Exceptions could be made for a myriad of reasons, including the status or stature of the work or its author.

What was the still-neophyte Zurlo to do, then, when Bernard Shaw's *Annajanska, L'Imperatrice* (*Annajanska, the Bolshevik Empress*) made its way across his desk in December of 1931? "No Russian subjects" as a directive was incompatible with the simple fact that, as Zurlo put it, "Shaw è Shaw, e Mussolini diceva spesso che era suo amico."[11] It would depend on what he found in the play: at a military station on the eastern front of Boeotia, General Strammfest would like to know if the Maximilianists, the Opposhavians, or the Moderate Red Revolutionaries will be in power the next day. His sympathies lie with the Panjuandrum royalty and the Grand Duchess Annajanska, whom his family has served for some 700 years. But – gasp! – Annajanska has run away and joined the revolution. Lieutenant Schneidekind attempts to console him with the reminder that they've *all* joined the revolution: "She doesn't mean it any more than we do."[12] However, when the captured Duchess is hauled in to his office, her commitment to that cause is clear. By the time the curtain comes down, she convinces her adoring General to join her: she will lead his army, to save the Revolution.

[11] Zurlo transcribes his letter and discusses the *Annajanska* case in *Memorie*, cit., pp. 190-91; for full documentation, ACS MCP UCT b. 405 f. 7633.
[12] Shaw, *Annajanska, the Bolshevik Empress* in The *Complete Plays, cit.*, p. 850.

By G.B.S.'s own admission, this was a "bravura piece" – a short play "with a barely passable dramatic pretext," made for a popular performer to show off his or her talent.[13] In it, his pointed witticisms freely mix with plain old silliness: when Annajanska talks back to Strammfest, Schneidekind attempts to cover his own mirth by hiding under a desk, which begins to shake convulsively; when the prisoner orders Strammfest about, he holds his pistol to his temple, threatening to shoot himself rather than disobey; when Schneidekind wrestles the gun away and tosses it to Annajanska, she begins shooting until she gets her way. What's more, the whole thing revolves around the rumor that she had run off with a Hussar; really, all along it was her in disguise, a Grand Duchess strong enough to throw her captors across the room and charismatic enough to mobilize the troops. The piece's subtitle, "A Revolutionary Romancelet," gives as good a sense of its tone as anything.

Beyond the fact that the 1917 comedy treated the Bolshevik revolution, problematic bits abound. There are numerous potential offenses to any royal Sovereign, decorum and prestige of authority figures is non-existent, there are even lines like, "How can I obey six different dictators, and not one gentleman among the lot of them?"[14] Nor does the play lack its Bolshevik cheerleading: the Duchess (who prefers to be called "comrade") waves a red kerchief in the air shouting, "Long live the Revolution!" and asks how children can learn to read the Bible without first reading Karl Marx.[15]

But of course the censor's task isn't simply to register any and every line that may express a prohibited sentiment; rather, he must interpret these lines in the context of the piece as a whole, and then judge that whole's appropriateness. Zurlo would've paid special attention to whether the play delivered some sort of pro-Soviet message, but that wasn't the only – or even foremost – issue, given especially that, as he had put it, Shaw was Shaw. He

[13] Shaw, in *The Complete Prefaces*, pp. 851.
[14] Shaw, *Annajanska*, cit., pp. 851-53. The Duchess, for istance, decribes her family as "so decayed, so out of date, so feeble, so wicked in our own despite," Strammfest is a failure on the battlefield, and Annajanska tells him so, while Schneidekind is downright insubordinate.
[15] *Ivi*, pp. 851, 854.

came to a conclusion, and his mission was clear: write a detailed and faithful report that poked a little fun at Shaw – the duce liked that sort of thing – but would allow Mussolini to make an exception to his own phobic anti-Russian rule. And so, with nary a mention of the text's touchiest elements – Annajanska's flag-waving, etc. – Zurlo stressed the dismissive depiction of communism ("Che fa per il popolo? Discorsi."). Above all, he argued that no one was safe from Shaw's paradoxical stings, writing, "Veleni? – senza dubbio, ma che si neutralizzano a vicenda. Più che veleni, fuochi d'artificio, scintille variopinte nel cielo." His argument was in keeping with the author's own description of the piece: its criticism was so unwieldy, he suggested, as to pose no threat at all. Nothing risked being taken seriously, not even by the most susceptible spectator. The play was safe, then. And yet, Mussolini said "No."

The many and decisive "NO"s discussed in Zurlo's memoir aren't necessarily evidence of a draconian process, however; in fact, the statistics – which reveal that only 9.4 % of the thousands of texts submitted were either rejected or suspended – help contextualize his anecdotes. What's more, there were always several steps in the process: Zurlo had to critically consider his own tastes in relation to the duties of his office, and he first had to chose whether to recommend a ruling or to pass the buck. If he passed, he reasoned carefully on his reports, and he tried to anticipate the duce's reactions – his power in deciding what information he needed was immense. Zurlo had a myriad of reasons for going to the duce: a "better safe than sorry" philosophy, an occasional optimism, the convenience of being able to say that the order came from on high, or even because a script enabled him to call some working principle to Mussolini's or the other superiors' attention. Though the prefect's massive tome at times makes Mussolini's "No"s seem inevitable, one also gets the sneaking suspicion that Zurlo went to him most often when he expected a negative response – when he was seeking confirmation that he was, indeed, supposed to prohibit a work. In other words,

the duce's "No" was often probable, but not inevitable. Zurlo's recurring optimism and the exceptions to the rules – there were some even as regarded Russophobia – testify to this point. Likewise, neither Mussolini's one-word rulings nor his reticence to justify them necessarily indicate lack of reflection. Though the dictator enjoyed the censor's often lengthy analyses, he himself was a man of few words. (And a man who didn't need to explain himself to anyone. As much as doing so may have helped Zurlo…)

Like any Head of State, the duce had numerous, sometimes contradictory, purposes to satisfy at once. *Annajanska* is an exemplary case for teasing out just how rough the seas could be. On the most basic level, we have two incompatible principles – Russian subjects, bad; Shaw, good – with a whole set of surrounding particularities to evaluate. What's more, these principles were themselves mutable, and Zurlo advised his readers to keep this in mind, for if one didn't, "quella che fu larghezza potrebbe sembrare severità."[16] Likewise, we risk interpreting as simplistic and rigid a decision that could in fact have been a complex adaptation to very special circumstances. In this case, it's tempting to follow Zurlo's tacit suggestion that Russophobia won out over Shavophilia, and it's not necessarily a mistaken conclusion. But it's not a foregone one, either.

Shaw's adventures with the Mussolini-Zurlo duo, in fact show us that foregone conclusions weren't the norm; principles evolved, people did, too, and so the censors worked on a case-by-case basis. Because G.B.S. was so popular during the *ventennio*, these cases would be many: if in 1916 Antonio Gramsci had commented that Torinese audiences weren't yet accustomed to his "eccentricità apparente," by 1943, the Italian public got its chance to see at least eighteen plays by the man whom d'Amico would call the "enfant terrible del teatro europeo": some of them, including *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*,

[16] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 6.

and *Saint Joan*, received multiple productions over the years.[17] The various Shaw-related censorship snafus arose because, simply put, one's status in Italy's – and Mussolini's – eyes was hardly fixed; and this was as true as for an individual as it was for a nation. The "friend" or "enemy" label could be ripped off and re-applied as the situation warranted, and didn't, in any case, presuppose a rigidly determined course of action.

The *Annajanska* moment was an especially significant one in the evolution of Shaw's relationship with the Mussolini regime. The play's closing hymn to war ("War sets everything right!")[18] would have recalled Shaw's October 1930 praise of Mussolini's speech against the hypocrisy of talking peace, widely reported on – as always – in the international press. But it might also have set uneasily with the duce, whose police files reported much more recently, in August of 1931, that Shaw was in Moscow to take part in the Congress of Friends of the Soviet Union founded by Henri Barbusse, a group whose intent was to carry out propaganda for communism.[19] On that occasion Shaw met with Stalin, gave a radio broadcast that sang Lenin's praises, and came back home saying that "the sun shines on Russia as on a country with which God is well pleased" so often that the western world began to talk about how he'd "gone dotty about Russia."[20] As we've seen, Shaw had always spoken favorably of fascist corporativism and of the duce, but he hadn't ever given them such glowing marks. Mussolini's generally positive predisposition toward Shaw wouldn't have been immune to such news. The play itself didn't make things any clearer: a spectator, who never has the time to review and reflect that a reader does, could've seen a general exultation of violence for the sake of revolution, and by extension praise for the *squadrismo* that helped

[17] Antonio Gramsci, "Serata d'onore di Emma Gramatica," 28 January 2010, now in *Cronache teatrali 1915-1920*, ed. Guido Davico Bonio, Aragno, Torino 2010, p. 19; Silvio d'Amico, *Cronache*, cit., V.I., p. 236.
[18] Shaw, *Annajanska*, cit., p. 855.
[19] Reports, respectively, from 30 October 1930 and 3 August 1931, ACS MI PolPol b. 1263. The former was furnished with the intent of providing a counter-weight to an informer's report from just a few days earlier (October 26) in which Shaw was alleged to have criticized Mussolini's economic policies and to have crossed over to the anti-fascist side.
[20] These words are Shaw's own, from a shortwave broadcast to the US in December of 1931; it followed the Moscow Broadcast on Lenin that summer and the lecture on socialism for the Independent Labor Party entitled "The Only Hope of the World." All reprinted in Shaw, *Platform and Pulpit*, cit.

bring fascism to power; or, instead, one could've gleaned in Annajanska's heroics a paean to Bolshevism – as the prefect pointed out, there was something in the romancelet for everybody.[21]

Shaw's Soviet sympathies were far from the only trouble spot, however: he was always talking politics in his plays! When Mussolini suggested dragging their feet on *Troppo vera per essere buona* (*Too True to Be Good*), where a giant green microbe appears on stage (Zurlo rightly called it a "bizzarro brevario anarcoide"), an impatient Shaw wrote to British Ambassador Dino Grandi, asking him to read the play and tell him "se vi trova qualche cosa di antifascista," and snidely quipped – with a reference to Mussolini's 1929 pact with the Vatican – that surely an agreement was possible: "non credo di essere peggio del Papa."[22] Mussolini ordered Zurlo to doctor the play until it was presentable; and the same would be necessary for others, including *The Apple Cart* (*L'Imperatore d'America*) – about a battle for power between Prime Minister and King – and *On the Rocks* (*Sugli scogli*), even if illustrious critic Renato Simoni judged its lesson to be that every country needs a Napoleon, a Mussolini.[23] Shaw never bit his tongue, so Zurlo wore down countless pencils transforming his texts for the Italian boards.

Fundamentally, though, it was as a Brit that Shaw was most troublesome. The spring after the Ethiopia counter-sanctions debacle discussed in chapter one, when Shaw refused his exemption from the duce's ban on English plays, the author would find his *Augustus Does*

[21] Gareth Griffith argues that the play posits war as a necessary procedure for a revolutionary government, and yet, that Shaw's choice of "a young, female member of the deposed royal family as a vehicle to comment on the advent of the first socialist revolution suggests an equivocal attitude to the proceedings." *Socialism and Superior Brains. The Political Thought of Bernard Shaw*, Routledge, London 1993, p. 251. Judging by his memoirs, Zurlo seemed not have strong feelings of his own in this case: while we don't have a testament to his opinion on Shaw in 1931-32, we do know from a letter he wrote to Shaw's Italian publisher Cesare Castelli a few years later that he admired the dramatist's work. In that letter he thanked Castelli for sending him a copy of Shaw's *Fascinating Foundling* (*Trovatella irrestibile*), which he had read for pleasure – something Zurlo, who characterized his reading of more than 1500 scripts a year as "abbondante e scorraggiatamente mediocre" had very little time to do. (Castelli's gift to Zurlo, not the only one he would give, also speaks to the high esteem in which Zurlo was held by those who came into contact with him.) Letter dated February 1, 1936, ACS MCP UCT b. 16 f. 267.

[22] MI, 133-35; archival files unfortunately are missing.

[23] Renato Simoni, *Trent'anni*, cit., IV, p. 344; ACS MCP UCT b. 302 f. 5543.

His Bit (*Augusto reca la sua pietruzza*) among that minority of "suspended" scripts. "Se qualcuno chiederà il visto," Zurlo left a note, "poiché la commedia è acre contro l'Inghilterra, si terrà conto allora del momento politico prima di prevedere."[24] Presumably, he meant that if Italian – English relations were good in that hypothetical moment, staging the play would be unadvisable. But why? Because it would provoke Italian audiences to think wrong thoughts about England? Because it risked irritating the British public and officials, especially in a friendly moment won after so many difficulties? Conversely, the prefect also must have thought that if relations were sour – and this was worth betting on in April of 1936 – *Augustus*' needling might have been well-received by Italian audiences (and maybe England's response would've been of little consequence in that case). Almost certainly, Zurlo would've passed the buck on this call; it was the kind he would've avoided, for, as a disciple of Aristotle more than of Mussolini, he didn't much enjoy playing tricks with a respected writer's art – as we already saw in chapter two.[25] Here was a censor who couldn't get around the fact that sometimes his work did indeed function as a political tool, but if given the opportunity to wash his hands of such strategizing – especially when such greats as Shaw were involved – he likely would've taken it.

Shaw's experiences render concrete the law's abstract stipulations regarding plays that could trouble foreign relations. The issue wasn't just what was said in front of Italian audiences, but how the government's (Mussolini's) decision to allow a given work – which could also be interpreted as promoting it – might be received by the international community. With G.B.S., the danger was all too clear: famous as he was, his apparently anti-English attacks, even from the Italian boards, wouldn't pass under the radar. While we needn't think that Zurlo was particularly concerned about the playwright, it's nonetheless worth speculating how an attack on England from the fascist stage would have been received,

[24] Handwritten note by Zurlo, 2 November 1936. ACS MCP UCT b. 403 f. 7595.
[25] The observation that Zurlo administrated "his territory" in Aristotle's name more than in Mussolini's is owed to Antonella Ottai, *Eastern*, cit., Bulzoni, Roma 2010, p. 210.

especially in the wake of the sanctions, when Shaw (and who knows how many others) believed that Mussolini (and who knows how many others) perceived him to be on Italy's side.

Zurlo's instructions to weigh the current political situation before pronouncing, then, speak to the substance of the job he and Mussolini did as censors. It was a sort of relations-management task, and one that went far beyond a patronizing "protection" of Italian audiences (though it was also often that, too) or ensuring orthodoxy in production. As Mussolini's "friend," Shaw was a tricky figure; at the same time, he wasn't in this any different than Pirandello or Bontempelli, whose troubles staying on the duce's good side I've addressed in previous chapters and will touch on again before this book comes to a close. What's different about Shaw is that his status was rendered unstable not only by his behavior or his writings but even more so by the fact that he got wrapped up – more than once and from multiple directions – in the question of how to deal with enemy nations: Soviet Russia or Great Britain, as the case may have been.[26]

*

If the Soviets and the English were the enemies of the moment, the French were enemies eternal – as far as Mussolini and his men of the theatre was concerned. The failure to create an authentic Italian dramatic repertory had been a sore spot since the Risorgimento, and the best men of the Italian theatre had been trying to oust the invaders from over the Alps ever since, when producers turned overwhelmingly to French plays to keep their houses active. The material objected to was commercial fare, well-made plays dedicated to (usually adulterous) love triangles, and its predominance on the Italian stage meant the victory of the

[26] The reader should refer to chapter two for an account of what happened when, following England's opposition to the invasion of Ethiopia, Mussolini banned all English plays, except for Shakespeare's and Shaw's. Most interesting, from a censorship point of view, is that Shaw took for granted that this choice was made on political grounds – because he was a "friend" to Mussolini and Italy, not because he was considered Britain's greatest living playwright.

bourgeois culture that was so anathema to Mussolini's vision of the new man. He hated and scorned it so much he called it "*porco*."[27]

In the first part of the twentieth century, especially in the aftermath of the Great War, the distaste took on nationalistic overtones. In 1920, Milanese audiences sat through two foreign flops – one French, one Hungarian – and lost their patience with a third: a production of Tristan Bernard's *L'idea del Signor Dumorel*, which was shouted into oblivion after two of three acts. Choose better! Enough of this foreign junk! We want Italian plays!, the crowd hollered.[28] The journalist who witnessed them, Marco Praga, was prompted to ask why Italian theatres imported anything and everything, some French plays being contracted even before they were written – not unlike today it's mysterious why all the Hollywood blockbusters gets easily to Italy but the best of independent cinema does not. At least part of the answer to his query was also much like it is today, and we find it in the review of a more successful French comedy by the only critic more authoritative than d'Amico at the time, the *Corriere della Sera*'s Renato Simoni. Writing on *The Celibate Husband* (*Il marito celibe*) by Paul Armont and Marcel Gerbidon, he commented:

> La commedia è di un genere che non bisogna prendere sul serio, né per lodarla né per biasimarla. […] Ma non bisogna essere troppo severi. Quando s'è riso tutta la sera, e clamorosamente, come s'è fatto ieri, non conviene perder tempo a giudicare. Certo è da desiderare che il teatro sia tutto puro e artistico, e, possibilmente, italiano. Ma non bisogna poi disprezzare troppo il riso, quando è provocato con ingegnosità. *Il marito celibe* appartiene ad un tipo futile del teatro che sta tramontando, e noi di questo tramonto non ci dorremo.[29]

Who could blame *capocomici* and impresarios, in short, if they wanted to send their public home laughing – and consequently fill their seats the next night, too? And who could blame the public for wanting to be, and being, entertained – even if by "foreign junk"?

[27] Literally, this means "pig." His use of the word this way is odd, but we can easily think of it as meaning something like "filthy."
[28] Marco Praga, *Cronache Teatrali 1920*, Fratelli Treves, Milano 1921, XLII, p. 191.
[29] Simoni, *Trent'anni*, cit. I. p. 615 (29 November, 1922).

But Mussolini, like Italy's artists and intellectuals, wanted something more from the theatrical arts. For some critics, efforts to obtain it were bearing good fruit: Pirandello, Bontempelli, and the other so-called *grotteschi* in the teens and twenties were reason for optimism that a native (anti-bourgeois) dramaturgy would emerge. And yet, it would be a battle hard won, if we are to listen to fiercely anti-fascist liberal critic Piero Gobetti (who would die in Paris, in 1926, after having been beaten up by blackshirt squads), who noted that French theatre was no longer the "incontrastato signore" of the Italian stage but nevertheless mused, "la società di oggi è quella di ieri: e se la nuova borghesia è più cinica, ama poi vedersi idealizzata dai poeti secondo le regole del vecchio sentimentalismo."[30] His observation signals the key problem of audience: the vanguard could do all the art theatre it wanted, but the public had to decide to go see it. And this is where Gobetti, Bontempelli, Zurlo, and Mussolini were all agreed: bourgeois comedies reflected the superficial – at best – and scabrous – at worst – elements of the society that was supposed to be under transformation, offering sugar-coated exoneration. Artists and intellectuals, however, were supposed to "educate taste and sensibility, to nourish the imagination." And the regime was to support them in this endeavor.

Speaking to the Italian Society of Authors and Editors (SIAE) in April of 1933, the duce urged his artists,

> Ho sentito parlare di una crisi del Teatro. Questa crisi c'è, ma è un errore credere che sia connessa con la fortuna toccata al cinematografo. Essa va considerato sotto un duplice aspetto, spirituale e materiale. L'aspetto spirituale concerne gli autori; quello materiale, il numero dei posti. [… Il teatro …] deve agitare le grandi passioni collettive, essere ispirata ad un senso di viva e profonda umanità, portare sulla scena quel che veramente conta nella vita dello spirito e nelle vicende degli uomini. Basta con il famigerato "triangolo," che ci ha ossessionato finora.[31]

[30] Piero Gobetti, "Il teatro italiano non esiste," in *Opere Complete* Volume terzo, Scritti di critica teatrale, Einaudi, Torino 1974, p. 678.
[31] Mussolini, *OO*, XLIV, pp. 49-50. Already in 1924, Mussolini had spoken to writers of the need to educate "taste and sensibility." See "Per le associazioni artistiche," in *OO*, XX, p. 276.

For Mussolini, that triangle was the emblem of all that was wrong with the prevailing entertainment – and, needless to say, those who streamed into the theatres to see it.

All of this is why he hit the roof in October of 1937 when he read the review in the paper of *La mia libertà*, a French comedy by Denys Amiel, staged by the Paola Borboni company, to whom he had agreed to give funds. It told the story of Alice, a young woman who is pleased to regain her freedom when her husband's betrayal (with her father's second wife, no less) brings an end to her marriage, until she meets a new man who appeals to her and, five minutes later, agrees to give up her independence once again, this time for him. To Claretta, Mussolini raged: "Sono pentito di aver dato 30 mila lire a quella [puttana] della Borboni, antipatica e odiosa," he roared: "Per poi fare queste belle produzioni. Il teatro francese è porco, però lei che è una [vacca] sceglie naturalmente le peggiori. E noi paghiamo per due di queste belle commedie. Mi viene l'anemia cerebrale." He regretted giving Borboni money because, he said, "non corrisponde in nulla," a phrase which carries two possible meanings, arguably related: that there was no return on the investment, or that her performance offerings weren't consistent with the regime's cultural project. [32] He ordered the show closed down.

On (French) bourgeois drama, Mussolini the censor and his right hand were in complete agreement, although Zurlo wasn't so quick to wholesale condemnations of the bourgeoisie, given that he was part of that class himself.[33] This reserve he admitted to Mussolini; the passage is lengthy, but worth citing as a perfect snapshot of the prefect's style – of the way he reasoned with the duce – and of what the fascists meant when they railed against bourgeois culture:

> La teoria che il borghese è di per sé un essere ignobile ha qualche cosa di falso. La colpa risale a Flaubert e alla sua famoso formula: "chiamo borghese

[32] Claretta Petacci, *Mussolini segreto*, cit., pp. 71-72. See also Zurlo, *Memorie*, pp. 56-7. None of this stopped Mussolini from giving the actress more discretionary funds in 1939 when she took her company to AOI. Giovanni Sedita, *Gli intellettuali*, cit., p. 110.
[33] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 69.

> chi pensa bassamente" ripresa poi da Remy de Gourmount: "il borghese è quello che non comprende." […]
> Se adesso la censura deve confessare parte del suo pensiero dirà che ha così mediocre opinione degli uomini da credere all'esistenza nella classe borghese di tutte le tare che le rimproverano gli intellettuali. Mariti vili, mogli insopportabili, gente capace di tutto per il denaro, gente che ha per regola l'opinione corrente, che chiama onore la considerazione degli altri, che non ruba per paura, che non uccide con l'arma ma lo fa con la calunnia, che per purezza femminile si accontenta della verginità fisica, ecc. […]
> Ma se la censura deve confessare anche l'altra parte del suo pensiero dirà di avere così buona opinione da ritenere che la virtù non sia assente dalle cose umane e dalla vituperate classe borghese.[34]

The overabundance of inconsequential love triangles and other similar fare, though, was still trying for the prefect, a self-declared prude and full-fledged believer in the sanctity of the marital bond. He mainly objected to the way many plays reduced love to sexual desire – a topic completely devoid of interest, if you asked him.

His response, then, to *La mia libertà* wasn't much different than Mussolini's, but he couldn't ban the play: the author was a friend of Minister Alfieri, the text wasn't actually immoral, and he couldn't enter into artistic questions. When the incensed duce banned the show, he asked for Zurlo's report on it; when he read it, he revoked his own ban.[35] This wouldn't be the first time the prefect's cool head brought his temper back in line. Even if neither would change his mind on the piggish quality of such entertainment.[36]

Zurlo suspected that Mussolini's aversion to love triangles on stage stemmed also from embarrassment over his own ménage. When the script for *The Nest* (*Le nid*), another French comedy by Andrea Birbaeu, came in, the rumor mill was churning at the expense of Mussolini and Petacci, and given his close ties to the police, Zurlo knew it was all true: the duce found greater comfort in his clandestine cove with Claretta than he did at home. A play about a man divided between nests, where the illegitimate one is described most favorably, was unacceptable for two reasons: its morality didn't adhere to fascism's official one, and, in

[34] *Ivi*, p. 98.
[35] *Ivi*, p. 57.
[36] *Ivi*, pp. 57-58.

the theatre, there was always the risk of a wisecrack comparing the duce to the protagonist. But Zurlo couldn't acknowledge either problem; he couldn't let on that he knew something, nor could he risk seeming critical of the Boss' behavior. In his report he feigned perplexed hesitancy, and to it received the expected negative reply, accompanied with an unprecedented – the only the duce would ever give – justification for it: "No – è francese." Strange, this explanation, and Zurlo wondered what motivated it: "Aveva compreso il mio pensiero intimo e volle giustificare il divieto con un altro motivo? Volle dire che solo in Francia sono possibili certi teorie? Volle condannare in blocco il teatro di un paese che odiava… per troppo segreto amore? Confesso di non poter scogliere l'enimma. Propendo per la prima ipotesi."[37]

Whatever Mussolini's discomfort may have been about analogies with his own situation, this time Zurlo's speculations tend toward the ridiculing interpretations of the duce that historians have so enjoyed. While his reading certainly isn't impossible, it seems more likely that the Capo's elucidation – beyond his reasons for offering it – was a kind of shorthand for all that I've discussed above. Later, during the war, when France became an official enemy, its drama would receive a blanket reduction; but in the mid-thirties, Mussolini's indications could only have been an affirmation of his dislike of the "*porco*," since as late as 1937, fifty-eight percent of the foreign repertoire – which was about eighteen percent of the whole – came from France.[38] Mussolini's comment wasn't exactly on the play's literal provenance, but on its model of theatrical art – and civilization. Nevertheless, Zurlo's observations usefully highlight, first, the extent to which he saw extra-theatrical

[37] *Ivi*, p. 59.
[38] Patricia Gaborik, "Lo spettacolo del fascismo," in *Atlante della letteratura italiana* III, Torino, Einaudi 2011, pp. 589-613. For complete statistical records, see *Lo spettacolo in Italia*, annual reports published for the years 1936-1941, SIAE, Roma 1937-1942. It should be noted, also, that because foreign plays were more likely to be presented by the major companies, who could charge more, non-Italian drama brought in higher box office receipts even if presented in smaller percentages, in that year representing nearly 48% of the total takings. Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale*, cit., p. 224.

considerations as important in determining Mussolini's verdicts and, second, how his attempts to read the duce's mind influenced his procedures.

Generally, scholars have stressed a xenophobic attitude in theatre management, highlighting pressures placed on companies to produce native drama and arguing that the regime's principle concerns were bringing production in line ideologically and assuring that it was an Italian program, in Italian. Such depictions contain elements of truth but need to be placed in perspective; at times they are willfully hyperbolic, but most often they reside in brief, necessarily superficial (and thus inadvertently imprecise) overviews of the era's theatrical production that can't for this reason be taken to the letter any more than "No – it's French" can.[39] It should also be noted, however, that embargoes on cultural products had tangible economic, not just symbolic, consequences; if they seem to be wounded retaliations – and quaint – there's nothing inherently fascistic in that. (Such a gesture of prideful vendetta isn't a whole lot different than the one that in 2003 pushed slews of Americans to boycott French wine – and re-baptize a favorite potato snack "Liberty fries"! – because they didn't like the country's non-alliance on Middle Eastern affairs.) Moreover, several factors determined the status of a country and its dramatic production in the regime's eyes.

On this point, France and the US provide an interesting point of comparison. The latter was – arguably much more than France – a cultural enemy; but for many years, American theatre held a bit part in the Italian stage repertoire (in 1937, only 4.4%). Consequently it wasn't as visible or valuable a target as the French theatre was; far from the cultural imperialist Italian thespians viewed the French theatre to be, American drama was if

[39] See for example, Patrizia Dogliani, *Il fascismo degli italiani. Una storia sociale*, UTET, Torino 2008, p. 237; Thompson, "Organisation," cit. Oddly, Scarpellini's initial commentary also gives such an impression, even if then the discussion unfolds more accurately. Mabel Berezin's study, largely based on facts and figures, is furthest away from understanding the actual censorship process and is representative in this case, declaring, "the regime opposed the staging of non-Italian plays." "Organization of Political Ideology: Culture, State, and the Theatre in Fascist Italy," in *American Sociological Review*, 56: 5 (October 1991) , pp. 639-651. Laura Cecarini's article "Il teatro straniero in epoca fascista," though brief, deals well with the inconsistencies towards foreign drama. In *Teatro e fascismo, Ariel* VIII.2-3 (May 1993), pp. 167-83.

anything a curiosity. More significantly still, though the American way of life was a frequent target of fascist criticism, the theatre that arrived was of entirely another sort; Bragaglia was the American drama's Italian champion, staging such plays as Thornton Wilder's groundbreaking *Our Town* and the great Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, a modern *Fedra* complete with an infanticide – hardly Paul Géraldy's *Christine*, in Italian, *Una storia d'amore.* ("Tutto Géraldy, si sa, è una storia d'amore; è sempre la stessa storia d'amore," d'Amico gibed).[40]

In the wake of the alliance with Nazi Germany and especially after mobilization for World War II, the situation became extreme, more closely resembling the image of fascist censorship and production that's been handed down. In 1941, France's percentage in the repertoire had fallen to just over fifteen percent (Hungarian comedies filled the void), and plays from the Reich predominated, representing 36.4% of foreign works staged.[41] But even then, unilateral directives weren't as frequent – or at least not as strictly enforced – as current scholarship suggests, and as the anecdote about Bragaglia's defense of American drama, seconded by the duce, already discussed in chapter two, tells us. Nonetheless, the already miniscule presence of American prose theatre decreased that year, to 1.59 percent.[42]

[40] d'Amico, *Cronache*, cit., IV.I, p. 92. It should be noted that the situation was quite different where film was concerned: American movies were the equivalent of French plays, and measures to restrict these were eventually put in place as well. See Gaborik, "Lo spettacolo del fascismo," cit. Bragaglia's tendency to produce Anglo-American drama was a constant in his career, but as discussed in chapter two and below, during WWII he also had a penchant for transforming some American plays into anti-American plays. In addition to the most notorious case, *The Little Foxes*, there was his production of Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset* – a great play, which ran for 195 nights when it premiered on Broadway in 1935, but a tragedy about the Sacco-Vanzetti affair and therefore a perfect candidate for theatrical anti-Americanism.

[41] Zurlo recounted that he engaged in some trickery where non-native plays were concerned: because the duce liked statistics, especially those which boasted a healthy Italian presence on stage, at times he evaluated and prohibited foreign plays that no one had actually intended to produce anyway. On the influx of Hungarian comedies, see Antonella Ottai, *Eastern*, cit.

[42] SIAE, *Lo spettacolo in Italia*, Years 1937 and 1941.

On Morality: Theatre for Pleasure vs. Theatre for Instruction

Despite the Lateran Accords of 1929, which reaffirmed Roman Catholicism's status as the sole official State religion, it wasn't necessarily Catholic doctrine that defined morality for the censorship office. On the contrary. For Zurlo, safeguarding morality and *buon costume* – perhaps best simplified with the terms decency and decorum – was hardly a simple task, as neither his moral standards nor those of the church were proper benchmarks. The fascist censor was, after all, no priest: on this he and the duce (personally, a rabid anti-cleric) were agreed. Plus, Zurlo admitted to being a prude, and he knew that "non bisogna confondere il problema morale col proprio gusto," but also – infinitely more importantly – that "il pudore delicato è virtù deliziosa in una donna, in un funzionario maturo perde parecchio del suo incanto."[43] Historians have repeatedly stressed, not without reason, that his guiding principles were moral rather than political.[44] However, it's clear that personal taste (whether Zurlo's or Mussolini's); social custom; and fascist diplomacy, politics, or ideological stance – themselves already interweaving – intersected with the lines of morality, Catholic or lay, in such fundamental ways as to render these distinctions untenable.

In some cases, the State's rapport with the Vatican created tensions or disputes. This was true of a scandal surrounding Sem Benelli's *Caterina Sforza*. The Church was a socio-cultural, moral, *and* political force that the regime – and Zurlo's office – had to contend with. The perennial question there was, to ban or not to ban? Zurlo's alarm bells rung when he reviewed the script, and so he sent it on to the Boss, whose response shows how the perspective of critic and politician complemented one another: "Il dramma di Sem Benelli – *Caterina Sforza* – è ben congegnato e nel complesso è un forte lavoro," he wrote, and continued with his instructions:

[43] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., 114, 11.
[44] See, for instance, Thompson, "Organisation,"; Berezin, "Organisation," who indeed argues that a random sampling of the archive will provide "nothing to suggest that […] plays rejected were rejected on fascist ideological grounds."; Paolo Emilio Poesio, "Le memorie non inutile del censore," in *Teatro e fascismo, Ariel* VIII.2-3 (May-December 1993), pp. 55-63.

> Bisogna togliere tutto intero il [primo] quadro perché
> a) non è strettamente necessario nell'economia dell'dramma
> b) due papi sulla scena sono troppi
> c) mentre la figura di Alessandro Borgia è nota anche al popolo minuto e la Chiesa vi si è ormai rassegnata, quella di Sisto IV è ignota al gran pubblico. E non è bella! Anzi.
>
> Ci sono qua e là espressioni e frasi che potrebbero dar luogo a qualche protesta da parte del clero, ma il censore laico può tirare di lungo.
> Communicare a Sem Benelli.[45]

But then, he changed his mind, and sent orders so surprising to Zurlo that he asked for confirmation of them: let the play go on as is. Zurlo would meet with Benelli and a Vatican representative to discuss a special revision for Roman stages. The prefect would then face angry attacks in the *Osservatore Romano*, which, to judge by the memo, the duce anticipated.

But that case was quite out of the ordinary, though; more typically, the tricky questions had to do with religious sentiment or social morality that the Vatican – and Catholics in general – paid special attention to. Benelli wouldn't get off easy on these grounds, either: *Caterina Sforza* was just the first of a series of troubles for him. In his memoirs, Zurlo wrote at length about Benelli, "quasi il diavolo" as far as the fascist were concerned; as a result, the poet's adventures with the censorship office have received marked attention that won't be replicated here.[46] But the general principles learned from his story go a long way to revealing Zurlo's M.O. If he claimed that the poet's reputation didn't impact his judgment, in reality, it did: the furor sparked by the anti-fascist's social critiques meant that Zurlo was more severe with him than with others. At one of Benelli's plays, the public was predisposed to see "un suo pensiero recondito anche dove non c'è," and the most common dramatic premises took on new flavor: "un personaggio benelliano che si lagnasse di esser ritenuto molesto solo perché dice la verità, diventa Benelli stesso non più moralista

[45] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 310-11.
[46] Bonsaver, *Censorship*, cit., discusses the Benelli affairs at length; see also Sandro Antonini, *Un palco per l'Ovra. Cultura, spettacolo e polizia politica fascista*, De Ferrari, Genova 2012; Giuseppe Pardini, "'La schiavitù delle beffe': Sem Benelli e il regime fascista," in *Nuova Storia Contemporanea* 5. 2002, pp. 131-52.

ma politico."[47] A point that goes a long way to explaining why, even after Zurlo's meticulous vetting of his texts – in one case there were more than 130 modifications – performances of the author's work repeatedly met with trouble.

Something similar would happen with Vitaliano Brancati's *Don Giovanni involontario*. Whereas the ambushes on Sem Benelli seemed to be kneejerk responses motivated by the personal antipathy of Starace and other fascists and happened despite the prefect's careful work, Brancati – and his allies in this affair, the maverick director Bragaglia and Zurlo himself – really seemed to have pushed too far. Brancati, born in 1907, in his younger years and into the early thirties was an ardent *mussoliniano*, having in fact written two plays exalting the duce and his Italy, *Piave* and *Everest*, and thereby gaining an audience with Mussolini and his good favor.[48] But by the time 1943 came along, when he wrote *Don Giovanni involontario*, he was quite a bit more suspicious toward the regime and its Capo.

The play sung out all his reservations, and though Zurlo gave it his *nulla osta*, after just a few performances it was yanked from the stage of Bragaglia's Teatro delle Arti. When the production went up in early March, the hierarchs present on opening night were dismayed by what they perceived to be a clearly anti-fascist play; they told Bragaglia that he was crazy, and on his own! ("Te la spicci tu.")[49] Bragaglia insisted that producing the play proved fascism's "free" climate, and – as he later pointed out – when Pavolini discussed it with the duce, the latter said Bragaglia was right. But a few nights later, a pack of GUF riff-raff came to create chaos, and though the police officer on duty diffused the situation, after this incident and a vicious attack on Brancati and Bragaglia in *Roma fascista*, the show was shut down.

[47] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 318.
[48] On this audience, see Brancati's 1931 "La mia visita a Mussolini," now in Vitaliano Brancati, *Racconti, teatro, scritti giornalistici*, ed. Marco Dondero, Mondadori, Milano 2003, pp. 1628-34.
[49] Alessandro Pavolini and Cornelio di Marzio (president and secretary general, respectively, of the Confederazione professionisti del teatro that bankrolled the Teatro delle Arti) were the hierarchs in question. Vanna Gazzola Stacchini, *Il teatro di Vitaliano Brancati. Poetica mito e pubblico (con inediti*), Edizione Milella, Lecce 1972, but also reported by Bragaglia in "Sempre 'anni difficili' per il teatro di Vitaliano Brancati" *Sipario*, IX, 103, November 1954. Reprinted in *Vitaliano Brancati*, "L'Illuminista" n. 28/29 anno X, ed. Walter Pedullà Ponte Sisto, Roma 2010, pp. 389-90.

The director doubted the GUF's claim that the MinCulPop had sent them: he and Minister Gaetano Polverelli were friendly (*si davano del tu*); he could've easily telephoned orders to suspend the show instead of setting a trap.[50] Instead, the run was brought to an end in this scandalous, and potentially dangerous fashion.

Current scholarship doesn't explain the how or why of any of this. One critic says that the play made no direct references to the Italian situation but for its social criticism was considered anti-fascist nonetheless. Another merely cites it as proof of the censor's systematic attempts to keep Brancati from reaching the public (when in reality, during the *ventennio*, several of his plays had been approved with fairly standard modifications; it was in the 1950s under the Christian Democrat censors that he would have trouble).[51] But it's simply not enough to cite the skirmish as an umpteenth example of fascism's violent repression of intellectual freedom: yes, *Don Giovanni involontario* was ultimately pulled from the boards.[52] But the text was first approved by Zurlo, and this is no minor detail to be dismissed – especially given the explicit allusions to Mussolini that criticism has oddly overlooked. Truth be told, the play's social critique was also – quite blatantly – a critique of fascists and fascism; and so, the entire *Don Giovanni involontario* fiasco needs to be explored if we want to understand fascism's strategies for dealing with intellectual dissent and, more broadly, its aesthetic politics.

When Bragaglia submitted the script in February of 1943, Zurlo restricted his interventions to questions of *buon costume*, altering only what he found too vulgar or explicit. One instance came near the end of the first act when Rosario asks Francesco (the protagonist and involuntary Don Juan) about all the women he's taken to bed: his response to

[50] ACS MCP Gabinetto b. 89; see also Francesca Vigna, *Il 'corago sublime' Anton Giulio Bragaglia e il 'Teatro delle Arti,'* Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2008, p. 353.
[51] See, respectively, Francesco Spera, *Vitaliano Brancati*, Mursia, Milano 1981, p. 17 and Vanna Gazzola Stacchini, *Il Teatro di Vitaliano Brancati. Poetica, mito e pubblico*, Edizioni Milella, Lecce, 1972, p. 91.
[52] Even Giulio Ferroni, in the introduction to Brancati, *Racconti* claims that the author's complete avoidance of political implications didn't save it from fascist aggression, p. lxvi.

each woman his friend names is simply, "Avuta!", which Zurlo changed to, "Ma anche lei."[53] His focus on minutae was, oddly enough, consistent with the fairly liberal vision he held of his task: "in arte il grado di moralità è in ragione diretta non della castità del soggetto ma della castità con cui il soggetto è trattato."[54] With comedies above all he found decency rather than morality *per se* to be the productive focus: when did comedy not turn on violation of moral principles? This partly explains why he did a lot more cutting and editing than banning.

A more substantial change came earlier in the play, when Francesco succumbs to the charms of the married Wanda. He spends the night with her and then returns to Rosario. When Rosario asks why he looks so proud, Francesco tells him to pick up a piece of coal lying on the street and write the number nine with it on the wall:

> ROSARIO: Nove? (*scrive*) E che vuol dire?
> FRANCESCO: Nove. (*si avvicina*)
> ROSARIO: (*come se improvvisamente capisce*): Nove!?
> FRANCESCO: Sì, nove.

And they leave: Rosario still sleepy, Francesco still impressed with himself. Zurlo sent the approved text back to the Teatro delle Arti, with this entire exchange eliminated. When Bragaglia protested, recalling an indecency in Pirandello's *L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù*, the prefect stood his ground:

> Lo so. – Senonchè quel lavoro è del 1919 e questo è di oggi; allora non c'era la conciliazione, non c'era il fascismo, non la censura ministeriale, non la guerra che consiglia di non suscitare polemiche e dissidi fra noi. Converrete infine che Brancati non è Pirandello, e che un autore illustre diminuisce in certo qual modo la responsabilità della censura.
> Eccovi il copione vistato, ma senza [la scena problematica] – Voi del resto avete troppe risorse per non saper suggerire dalla scena ciò che volete burlandovi (proprio così) della censura.[55]

This letter is a window onto Zurlo's work like no other. We see with it that the rules weren't the same for everybody: and Brancati was no Pirandello. (If the Mussolini of 1917 had railed

[53] ACS MCP UCT b. 282 f. 5150; Vitaliano Brancati, *Racconti*, cit (here p. I.iv.i., p. 941).
[54] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 100.
[55] ACS MCP UCT b. 282 f. 5150.

against this kind of censorial inequality, surely by 1943 he had come to see its practicality.) The prefect also somewhat surprisingly acknowledged that he had only so much control, practically inviting the director to find a creative way to suggest that love had been made nine times. Perhaps most significant, though, is his blunt – albeit loquacious – way of saying "times have changed": fascism was firmly established now, there were the Lateran Accords, centralized censorship, the need for solidarity in a country at war… This was life under fascism, he seemed to be saying: what did Bragaglia expect?

It's the very collapsing of all these points together in answer to the director's inquiry about morality issues – or better, decency and decorum – that highlights the extent to which the moral, social, and political could be interconnected. Like with Sem Benelli, a social critique (in this case, one that sends up the prevailing sexual morality) became automatically political; Zurlo's noting that a play shouldn't create "dissidi fra noi" can in this sense be read as a tacit acknowledgment of *Don Giovanni involontario*'s anti-fascism. Though one scholar has disapprovingly noted Marxist critics' tendency to collapse Brancati's social critique and his anti-fascism into one and the same sentiment, here – as in narrative works like *Gli anni perduti* – the two are indeed quite difficult to distinguish.[56] The racy material is part and parcel of a condemnation of a sexual behavior and morality promulgated by the fascist rhetoric of virility; the play's obviously critical presentation of a world obsessed with libidinous masculinity and paternity was clearly vulnerable to accusations of anti-fascism.[57]

Indeed, early in the play, a clear message rings out: women prefer even the ugly Rosario and Francesco, the antithesis of the virile fascist, to their hierarch husbands. Giulietta renders this explicit when she says that she'd be happy if her husband, a disciple of Nietzsche

[56] See Domenica Perrone, *Vitaliano Brancati. Le avventure morali e i "piaceri" della scrittura* (Bompiani: Milano, 1997), 179. But in the case of *Don Giovanni involontario* and works like *Gli anni perduti*, it is indeed difficult to see the difference.

[57] For the fascist "rhetoric of virility," see Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 1997. On how it played out in actual pratice, see Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*, University of California, Berkeley 1993.

"che piega gli eventi e comanda al destino," found her with an ugly wretch like Rosario.[58] Wanda, on the other hand, pays rhetorical homage to her husband but jumps into Francesco's embrace when he finally takes an interest in her, despite his boredom over the pressure to womanize and procreate. During their rendezvous, Francesco finds her house too dark; but each time she turns on a light, it shines on a photograph of her husband, always in a different guise: on a horse, with weapon in hand, as a groom on his wedding day. When the exasperated hopeful asks if there is a light that doesn't shine on the husband, Wanda explains, "La luce, in questa casa, viene da mio marito."[59] Just the sort of admiration a good woman should show for her husband, and any good fascist for the duce, who, as the saying went, "ci dà la luce."[60] It's hard to imagine an audience member who wouldn't have thought of Mussolini – the charismatic *divo* of endless propaganda newsreels – each time Wanda's flip of a switch revealed her "light source" in a new pose and a new uniform.

But if here Francesco is the chosen alternative to the duce, as the play moves forward, he becomes his alter-ego. From another direction entirely, Brancati then proceeded to use his Don Juan to comment on that aspects of the cult of Mussolini that anti-fascists and then historians would have much to say about: the sexual and sexualized dictator. Nearly a year and a half after the dictator's death, a newspaper article by none other than Brancati on that unique Italian form of machismo, "*gallismo*" (literally, "roosterism"), prompted Bottai to look back. He wrote of his compatriots' need to liberate themselves from "questa grottesca manía esibitoria, che radica nei genitali tanto della nostra pretesa 'genialità,'" and reflected, "Il gallismo ha avuto una gran parte nella decadenza ultima di Mussolini. Ne era infetto, fino al punto di non intendere il carattere 'sacro' della vecchiaia," the ex-Minister concluded.[61]

[58] Brancati, *Don Giovanni involontario* in *Racconti*, cit., p. 938.
[59] *Ivi*, p. 926.
[60] Hyperbolic praise like this was ubiquitous. The famed Roman actor Ettore Petrolini expressed himself this way in a volume dedicated to Mussolini by Italian artists: " [Mussolini] è il sole d'Italia – il sole di oggi – che illumina, riscalda, crea e distrugge," cit. in Iacciao, *Scena*, p. 60n.
[61] Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario 1944-1948* ed. Giordano Bruno Guerri, Rizzoli, Milano 1999, p. 429.

Giving himself over to the life of the Don Juan, Francesco begins to resemble the duce in this. As act two opens, he's forty-five years old and in despair, as he has fallen in love with Claretta, a much younger woman, and frets over his ability to interest her. She is the daughter of a physician and twenty-seven years her lover's junior: a carbon copy of the real life Claretta (the age difference being off by just a year). She is desperately in love with Francesco, but also scared of him because, in intense moments, he opens his eyes too wide. A blatant caricature of Mussolini.

In the end, Francesco regrets his conversion to *dongiovannismo,* coming to realize that the pleasures of machismo disgust him, and laments the time he spent womanizing instead of doing something useful, like reading.[62] In that rejection of the life of virile action, Brancati's satire on blackshirt libido expressed a total philosophy – and, critics saw, a repudiation of the worldview propagated by the regime. The play concluded that "volere e non potere sono la stessa cosa" according to Achille Fiocco, and in the hero's "consapevolezza del non potere" – his realization that he had no control over his own destiny and that nothing happened as he had imagined it – there was, he moaned, a certain "squallore." In the end, this was "un caso piuttosto grave, mi sembra, e dal quale non so come si potrà uscire e che bene ne verrà."[63] What offended, in other words, was Francesco's and the play's lack of *volontà*, intrinsic not only to fascism's self-conception but, more importantly, to the "spiritual" basis of its would-be revolution. The inertia, the impotence, and the boredom of Brancati's characters – like those of his friend Moravia, renowned for the subtler anti-fascism of works like *Gli indifferenti* – came to stand for an approach to life wholly antithetical to that of fascism's men of action.

Particularly striking is how deeply rooted such notions were in the consciousness of the *ventennio*: as seen in chapter two, a similar analysis of Pirandello's opus in *Critica*

[62] Francesco Galleri,"Ciliege e dongiovannismo," in *Film,* 13 March 1943, p. 6.
[63] *Il Dramma* n. 399 (1 April 1943), p. 30.

fascista was the fulcrum of debates regarding its fascism (or non-fascism). That was back in 1926-27, when reflections on what it meant to be fascist were in many ways just beginning; by 1943, this was a logic internalized. During those early debates Bontempelli had insisted that literary works would carry traces of fascism if "veramente l'epoca è fascista, con sincerità e nel profondo."[64] This critic's response to *Don Giovanni involontario* suggests that on some questions it was: not because Brancati unknowingly presented some sort of fascist "outlook," but because the line between social critique and political rebellion, between individual morality and collective philosophy, had become so blurred as to render them indistinguishable.[65]

It's hardly surprising, then, that *Don Giovanni involontario* was shut down. What does startle is that it ever got as far as it did. True to fashion, Bragaglia suggested that the Capo's largesse in defending his right to stage the satire had to do with the confidence they shared. He knew the show carried a risk, but "decisi di contare, ancora una volta, sulla fiducia che in me aveva Mussolini."[66] His claim that the duce backed him up is particularly important in light of stories of the dictator's intransigence when it came to his own person on the stage, which are legendary – in both senses.

Denis Mack Smith's reduction of Zurlo's memoirs into a brief paragraph, for example, leads him to simplistic conclusions like this one: "The least hint of satire affecting himself brought an immediate veto. He thus refused Shaw's *Caesar* and *Cleopatra* because it showed a bald dictator […]."[67] But the memoirs and the mountains of surviving documentation belie such claims. It's rare that regulations were so strict and unilateral, and, when it came to Shaw's piece, Zurlo said something altogether different: out of pure

[64] Massimo Bontempelli, "Arte fascista," cit., p. 416.
[65] Brancati praised a whole other type of work, writing in his diary that the best literature from the *ventennio* was that which the germ of fascism wasn't even visible: for him, works by Palazzeschi, Montale, and Moravia were more interesting than the "scopertamente polemiche" works of others. *Diario Romano*, 3 maggio 1950, in *Racconti*, cit., p. 1484.
[66] Bragaglia, "Sempre 'anni difficili,'" cit.
[67] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, cit., p. 179.

curiosity, d'Amico asked whether the play would be approved again (it had been done most recently, by Pitoëff, well into the Mussolini era, in 1929); Zurlo was inclined to think that with some modifications it would pass, while Pavolini was more skeptical. But no veto ever came from Mussolini because no request was ever made.[68] The point here isn't to suggest that that fascist censorship was "not as bad" as we've been told, but only that it worked in different and far more sophisticated ways than scholars like Mack Smith would lead us to believe. If there's something unsettling about Mussolini as censor, it's not that he ruled with an iron fist, but that the prospect of insulting or angering him, or provoking a problematic public response, could propel even the Ministers who were most sensitive to aesthetic concerns (Ciano and Pavolini) to shy away from worthy and important works.

Against this backdrop of the dictator's presumed obduracy, Bragaglia's account may sound fishy. And yet, there's no reason to doubt it (even if his interpretation of Mussolini's motives should be taken with a grain of salt). Preemptive censorship was quite a different matter than calling in the forces of public security to shut down a production to which time and money had been given. And whereas coming to a decision with Zurlo was a relatively behind-closed-doors affair, shutting down a show was a public, attention-grabbing, and controversial one. Bragaglia was right: presenting *Don Giovanni involontario* would demonstrate that artists practiced freely. Mussolini's squashing it would have sent the opposite message and, in a moment when things were going from bad to worse for the regime, perhaps also have betrayed an anxiety about maintaining the duce's mythic status. From this point of view, his actions were unremarkable.

It's not inconceivable, therefore, that Polverelli sicked the squads on the Teatro delle Arti – and with the Boss' secret approval. This would've been a carefully-weighed option of

[68] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 178. The play does not figure among those in the archive catalog. While generally speaking this could also mean that a file has been lost; here, it instead seems corroborating evidence of Zurlo's story. Incidentally, Pirandello, who had thought about producing Shaw's play, had the same opinion about it, in contrast to another *Cesare*, by Sherwood, whose spirit was too "antiromano" for the fascist stage. Luigi Pirandello, *Lettere a Marta Abba*, cit., p. 163.

a politic statesman who understood that he had more to gain from a manufactured display of popular approval (in the form of rebellion against criticism of him) than he did from suppressing that denigration. Letting things play out as he did, the duce would've remained apparently innocent of the reprisal but nonetheless achieved the desired effect. This strategy was famously encouraged by his admired Machiavelli, in the section of the *Principe* that tells of Cesare Borgia's calling on a tried and true thug, Rimirro de Orco, to do his dirty work for him: the duce, like Borgia before him, was thus able to demonstrate that "se crudeltà alcuna era seguita, non era causata da lui ma da la acerba natura del ministro."[69] It would've hardly been the first time Mussolini stepped aside and let fascist militants fight his battles for him, whether in internecine PNF conflicts or in more public affairs like this one.[70] There is no proof it went down this way, but however it did – this wasn't the assassination of Matteotti, so whether or not Mussolini gave the order isn't quite so pressing – it is another instance showing that the fascist management of theatre was a whole lot more complicated than forcing orthodoxy through censorship or producing bad propaganda.[71]

The behavior of the others – Brancati, Bragaglia, and Zurlo – is fare more curious. Offering the play for public performance, at the "Sperimentale dello Stato" where his cry *couldn't not* reach the hierarch's ears, was for Brancati an act of intellectual resistance that came at an awfully tumultuous time, in March of 1943: the war was going badly, rations were slim and so were Italians, and discontent mounted. On that selfsame March 5 when GUF action erupted at the show, the first worker's strike in eighteen years began at the Fiat

[69] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. Giorgio Inglesi, Einaudi, Torino 1995, chapter VII.27, p. 46.
[70] Salvatore Lupo, *Il fascismo*, describes the frequent use of such a governing strategy within the PNF, especially when it came to conflicts over such key issues as the use of squadrist violence. See also Emilio Gentile, *Storia del partito fascista, 1919-1922: Movimento e milizia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1989.
[71] Because this event had to do with a public performance and not just the in-office review of a script, it was of course more clamorous than many others. But the "informality" of censorship process is something we've seen time and again – Mussolini's legendary "la censura a quell'opera la farò io" in regards to Pirandello's *La favola del figlio cambiato* (see chapter one) – and was common in regards to literary censorship as well. Bonsaver indeed observes that "Mussolini never stopped preferring to settle censorship issues outside of formal channels and explicit legislation": even if, quite often, this meant simple collaboration – negotiation – between regime officials and writers. Guido Bonsaver, "Mussolini's Fascism, Literary Censorship, and the Vatican," Primerjalna književnost (Ljubljana) Special issue 31 Special issue (2008), pp. 201-12.

Mirafiori plant in Turin. It marked the first of a wave that would continue throughout the month and, in retrospect, signal the beginning of the end for the Mussolini regime. (Just four months later, on July 25, the Fascist Grand Council would give the vote of no confidence that resulted in the duce's arrest.) The workers weren't the only agitators. From Cremona, just a month after the *Don Giovanni* event, Roberto Farinacci wrote to the Capo,

> Il partito è assente e impotente. Ora avviene l'inverosimile. Dovunque nei tram, nei caffè, nei teatri, nei cinematografi, nei rifugi, nei treni, si critica, si inveisce contro il regime e si denigra non più questo o quel gerarca, ma addirittura il Duce. E la cosa gravissima è che nessuno insorge. Anche le Questure rimangono assenti, come se l'opera loro fosse ormai inutile.[72]

Brancati seems to have been bravely bold in his lampooning, but the Ras of Cremona's letter also suggests that his voice was just one more in a chorus; perhaps the diffuse restlessness gave the courage to speak out. On the other hand, provoked by the increasing – and decreasingly clandestine nature of – rebellion, fascist violence against citizens was on the rise, and so risk there certainly was (even if the worst of such reprisals in this period were often directed toward already disenfranchised citizens).[73]

Anton Giulio Bragaglia's choice to direct the show seems both a little less courageous and a little more crazy. His position, as secretary of the director's syndicate and member of parliament, was surely a protected and relatively informed one. Though he would later write that he "waited for the blow" from above, it's far more believable that he had at least some inkling of what he could get away with. At the same time, a gesture perceived to be *disfattismo* – between 1935 and 1943, cause of nearly 1/5 of all political confinements[74] – could have been ill-tolerated from someone who was for all intents and purposes a representative of the regime. It also could've further bolstered the accusations of many that

[72] Cit. in F. W. Deakin, *Storia della Repubblica di Salò*, Einaudi, Torino 1963, p. 228. See also Michael Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, chapter 6.
[73] See Ebner, *Ibidem.*
[74] *Ivi*, p. 176-181.

his faith in fascism was opportunistic rather than sincere.[75] Still, he had certainly earned his brownie points with the *gerarchi* – especially with his participation in Pavolini's propaganda schemes (like the anti-semitic *Little Foxes* discussed in chapter two) and did have some reason to think that the duce would stand behind him, just as he had done in defense of American drama two years earlier.

But Zurlo? Historian Pasquale Iaccio has suggested that heresy was knowingly tolerated from some sources and that "tutto, o quasi, poteva essere consentito" if certain "protective" conditions could counteract the potentially negative effects of a more challenging play.[76] The Teatro delle Arti could indeed be considered a pretty safe enclave, as its audience was well-educated, elite, and relatively small (we're talking about a 600-seat theatre).[77] Moreover, good-natured teasing, as Bakhtin has taught us, could function as a harmless, carnivalesque safety valve; this was the logic underpinning the non-severity towards the variety stage, and – as we'll see further on – Mussolini and Zurlo agreed that an (at least apparent) liberality was good for spectators and performers alike. Unfortunately Zurlo didn't write about this case – Brancati is never mentioned in his memoir[78] – so we can only speculate, and while all of these considerations provide at least partial explanations for a surprising call, in some ways they seem more convincing when it comes to Mussolini's strategy for dealing with the foul than it does for Zurlo's approval of the text: if he was relatively lenient when it came to the variety and popular theatre of folks like Petrolini and

[75] As noted in chapter two, police files attest to this perception of Bragaglia. ACS MI PolPol, b. 182.
[76] Iaccio, *Scena*, cit., pp. 23, 60. Iaccio uses the example of Ettore Petrolini to make his case about accepted heresy: because the Roman comic actor was a vocal fan of the regime, his needling was tolerable, for at worst (from a fascist point of view), little transgressions were minor points to be subtracted from a comprehensively high score on a regime approvability test.
[77] Zurlo indirectly confirms this assertion when he recounts, for instance, that while he approved O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* for the Roman audience of the Teatro delle Arti, he didn't think it was wise for Bragaglia to take it on tour around the country as he had hoped to do, see Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 330.
[78] It's possible that Zurlo didn't write about Brancati because he was still a visible and active writer, and in this way it could have been "touchy" to bring him into the discussion. Zurlo's reticence on this case is, however, a point in his favor against those scholars who have criticized him for trying to appear more anti-fascist or rebellious than he in fact was. In reality, the records give us no reason to doubt Zurlo's antipathy for fascism – quite the contrary – nor does his memoir even really attempt to make such a claim, for Zurlo is clear from the start that he intended to do his job well and, despite the small battles he recounts, his good faith in this abundantly clear.

Michele Galdieri, for the more elite prose theatre, as Iaccio himself points out, Zurlo was typically the goalie whose job it was to prevent such balls from landing in the net. Likewise, while the idea that some material was appropriate in a protected cove but not for the broader public makes sense for intellectually challenging fare, its application to a flagrant satire is less obvious – especially when we're talking about the fascists' home theatre.

On the other hand, we've also seen that who the playwrights were mattered. After the war, Brancati would emerge as a major anti-fascist writer, but in 1943, he wasn't that Brancati yet. In point of fact, just ten years earlier, as mentioned, he had hailed Mussolini in works like *Everest* and *Piave*. And in the mid-late thirties, despite the growing antipathy unveiled in works like *Gli anni perduti*, he had earnestly sought collaboration with regime newspapers and offices – including Zurlo's – and expressed his commitment to the duce with rhetorical flourishes that recalled Machiavelli: "Nel momento in cui V. E. sta veramente smuovendo intorno a noi le montagne," he wrote, "sarei lieto di poter voltolare anch'io il mio sassolino."[79] If Zurlo hadn't granted Brancati total indulgence because he "was no Pirandello," we might also reflect – by way of comparison – that he was no Sem Benelli either. The poet had earned himself a reputation that made lenience toward him outstandingly prohibitive, but the same wasn't true for Brancati. His political commentary was apparently less incendiary not only for Mussolini, but also for Zurlo. Once again, the inconsistency of censorship practices that the duce had complained about years before emerge as the *modus operandi* for him and his right hand man.

Though Mussolini grew frustrated with the party and police force in this exact period – enough so that in April he replaced Chief Senise – as usual, he evidently had no complaints about Zurlo's verdict (not surprising, if he himself, at least officially, defended Bragaglia's right to direct the show). Whatever elements combined to determine Zurlo's decision, the

[79] ACS MCP Gabinetto Versamento II, b 2; see also Patricia Gaborik, "Il censore censurato," in *Atlante della letteratura italiana* III, Einaudi, Torino 2011, pp. 786-92.

choice to absorb the play's bluntest wallops (the spoofs of the duce), also meant accepting the far graver lampooning of a fascist ethos. That Zurlo knew this – and he was too savvy to not know this – and gave the play its visa anyway forces us to take seriously the work that he did, and to allow its discrepancies and ambiguities to exist, unsettling as they may be. The real interest in the *Don Giovanni involontario* case, however, isn't the noise the whole event created, but its revelation of how deeply intertwined morality and politics were under a regime whose ambitions were not merely repressive but, indeed, revolutionary.

Vitaliano Brancati's true censorship woes would come under the Christian Democrats (the DC) who, after the war, prohibited three of his plays in a row – *Raffaele* (1948), *Una donna di casa* (*A Stay-at-Home Woman*, 1950), and *La Governante* (*The Governess*, 1951), this last because, as the report stated, it was "tutta impostata sull'equivoco personaggio di una anormale": meaning, a lesbian.[80] The enraged author published a pamphlet, *Ritorno alla censura*, decrying the worst of both worlds: DC prudery and a fascist mentality (along with ex-fascist functionaries) combined to create censorship even worse than there had been under Mussolini. The irony in this was that his two supporters in the postwar commission were its two ex-fascists, Cesare Vico Lodovici, who had evaluated the artistic quality of radio dramas, and former Director General of Theatre De Pirro. This isn't to say that a text like *La Governante* would've gotten a Mussolini-approved visa. On the contrary, Zurlo failed in his few attempts to license plays about "inverted" characters.

Homosexuality – or sexual acts that could be classified under such a rubric – weren't officially or specifically punishable under fascist law because it was decided that these measures were pointless in a country where such "vices" were hardly diffuse. Persecution of

[80] This case is an ideal one for discussion of the continuity between censorship during and after the dictatorship. Brancati, as noted in the text here, would respond violently to the prohibition on this work, and in fact argue that censorship post-Mussolini was even worse than during the *ventennio*. His argument wasn't without its internal contradictions, however. See Gaborik, "Il censore censurato," cit., for further documentation Barbara Rossi, "Il buon costume della censura," in *Sipario* n.7 (December 2007), and for a focus on the repressive nature of Christian Democrat theatrical censorship, Sonia Gentili, "Il male della banalità. Nuovi documenti su Vitaliano Brancati e la censura," in *Bollettino di Italianistica*, IV.2 (2007).

gay individuals did exist, however, and homosexuality was increasingly considered a political offense, for same-sex amorous acts were a threat not just to the fascist rhetoric of virility but also, more practically, to the demographic campaign. Even if surveillance was common and instances of persecution, arrest, and violence did augment in the second half of the 1930s, these were neither systematic nor policy-driven and tended to be limited to the most flagrant cases, often meaning transvestites or prostitutes. This serves to highlight, of course, not any sort of fascist enlightenment, but only a concerted effort to veil and deny: for homosexuals, safety resided in keeping a low profile, as the regime preferred to downplay their existence.[81]

Thus Zurlo's citation of Lord Alfred Douglas in titling the relevant chapter of his memoir "l'amore che non osa dire il suo nome" is particularly apt. The chapter is brief, as few submissions tackled homosexuality, and after three "No"s – all on plays that concerned female protagonists – Zurlo intuited that the battle wasn't worth fighting. But this also had to do with his crystal clear sense that the duce and *gerarchi* weren't the only ones who would've shunned such plays; his discretion was guided by a keen perception of the audience's pulse, which he gained not only by going to the theatre but also through his close ties to the police department – practically omniscient given its daily contact with the public, its vast spy network, and its close surveillance of theatrical performances (agents were sent to every show, lest actors dared to perform scripts as submitted rather than as approved – that is to say, ignoring the prefect's modifications).[82] To Zurlo, it was obvious that audiences didn't want to see that stuff on stage:

[81] In 1932, legislators ultimately rejected the parts of the Rocco penal code designed between 1927-31 that would have singled out homosexual relations because, they concluded, there was no need for them in a country where "habitual homosexuality" was rare. In effect, unlike in Nazi Germany, where activism had rendered the male homosexual community quite visible and therefore vulnerable to explicit and active repression, in Italy such a group's existence was essentially denied. While individual "pederasts" could be arrested and sent to *confino* for creating unlabeled "scandal," persecuting them as a group, or a race (the one the Nazis branded with a pink triangle) would mean, in short, acknowledging their existence. See Paolo Zanotti, *Il gay. Dove si racconta come è stata inventata l'identità omosessuale*, Fazi, Roma 2005, chapters 20 and 21; Dogliani, *Il fascismo,* cit.; and Ebner, *Violence*, cit., pp. 193-97.

[82] Producers were beholden to keep a copy of the approved script on hand and present it upon request. Ferrara, *Censura teatrale*, p. 30. See also Antonini, *Un palco per l'Ovra*, cit.

> Lasciamo per un momento da parte la morale (i luoghi comuni sono evidenti e noiosi), ma dobbiamo pure tenere presente la disposizione del pubblico. […] quando la scena parla – e, nel caso, a lungo – di miserie segrete atte a suscitare soltanto il disgusto sia pure non esente da pietà, diventa addirittura intollerabile. In questi casi, anche senza la censura è l'estetica che salva l'etica.[83]

In other words, when it came to such a question, the voices from below rung out as loud as those from above. On one hand, Zurlo thought it a bit silly to bar from the stage things less scandalous than people saw in their own lives; on the other, he saw that theatrical censorship had to be relatively strict (much more than that of books, for example) because in the playhouse, the average public's intelligence was lower than that of the most illuminated spectators' and its morality – hypocritical or real, he specified – was "sempre più convenzionale ed esigente."[84] In some cases, then, censorship was guided not just by the dictatorship's repressive tendencies, but also by just as pervasive socio-cultural constraints.

What's perhaps most noteworthy about homosexuality as representative of morality issues writ large is its banality. That is to say, there is a strong case to be made on this point for the non-uniqueness of fascist censorship. In-depth comparative analyses – impossible to conduct here – would certainly help to place the fascist situation in perspective; Italy most certainly wasn't the only place in the 1930s (or later!) where alternative lifestyles would lack recognition or representation, on stage or elsewhere; nor was it the only system whose regulations on moral and sexual subjects seem utterly laughable today: Hollywood's Hays Code also prohibited the representation of sexual "perversion," outlawed kisses longer than three seconds, and recommended extreme caution when showing a man and a woman on the same bed – all suggestion was to be avoided. Directives of the kind were part and parcel of the more generally puritanical norms that governed at the time; as Antonella Ottai has pointed out, guidelines followed the "mandates of a society comprehensively censorial and

[83] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 125.
[84] *Ivi*, p. 120.

repressive," and in fact Hollywood's infamous Hays Code for film censorship was arguably in some ways more extreme than fascist Italy's regulations were. Ciano, who collaborated with Hays on film trade, was in fact interested in his measures precisely because they seemed so effective.[85] Moreover, keeping in mind the *Governante* affair, it's difficult to make a case that the regulations of the *ventennio* were exceptionally strict on such issues. Non-exceptionality, severity, and continuity aside, however, the point that emerges here – once again – is the interplay between the various layers often professed to be distinct: that morality and *buon costume* were perhaps the most frequently visible targets of Zurlo's and Mussolini's interventions, to imagine them as separate from – and even trumping – ideological and more expressly political (shall we say, policy-driven) issues means not only to misunderstand the censorship process but also the logic underpinning the duce's anthropological-revolutionary ambitions for fascist Italy.

The Empire Strikes: The Other Internal Enemies

If homosexuality wasn't a particular concern for the regime – or for the Mussolini-Zurlo duo – racial relations were. Questions of race, too, were from the start wrapped up in formulations of fascist nationalism and in conceptions of the "new man," but whereas the fascists preferred to shroud homosexuality question in silence, its racist policies found rather vocal and visible application, particularly following the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 (and subsequent declaration of the Italian Empire) and the alliance with Nazi Germany beginning late in 1936.[86] Mussolini didn't introduce colonialism to Italy; when he came to power, the country already possessed territories in North and East Africa and the Dodecanese Islands. Nonetheless, regime ideology allowed for – nay, required – the incorporation of the colonial

[85] Ottai, *Eastern*, cit., p. 207.
[86] Emilio Gentile has stressed the extent to which fascist racism was consonant with the project of constructing the "new man"; see "'L'uomo nuovo' del fascismo. Riflessioni su un esperimento totalitario di rivoluzione antropologico," in Id. *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2002 and *La Grande Italia. Il mito della nazione del XX secolo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2006.

project and its racist policies into fascism's larger scheme of totalitarian nationalism, and the push to expand the empire was promoted as symbolically and materially necessary – and, also, as Italy's right. The imperial campaign served fascist notions of palingenesis and *romanità*: the modern descendants of the great Roman empire, the logic went, deserved an empire of their own. But, the duce argued in 1926, they also needed it: "noi abbiamo fame di terre perché siamo prolifici e intendiamo restare prolifici."[87] Such proclamations foreshadowed the intent to inhabit the conquered lands in large numbers.

It was this impending up-close-and-personal contact with Africans that brought about a censorship watershed. Building overseas (mainly African) colonies and relocating Italian citizens there meant that their relations with the native populations would need to be carefully managed; especially in Ethiopia, legislation, urban planning, and architecture were principle means of such control. The regime aspired to separate Italians from conquered subjects in a system likened by many scholars to apartheid: in Italian East Africa (AOI: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia) both public and private locales were segregated, intimate relations between Italians and indigenous peoples were outlawed, and, as this latter was violated often enough, children born from such unions were denied Italian citizenship.[88]

But as with every aspect of life under fascism, cultural conditioning – in such forms as propaganda and censorship – would inevitable play an important role in achieving set goals. The aforementioned watershed happened in 1934, when Mussolini was perhaps especially sensitive to racial issues, given his plans. The duce's discovery of a novel about a relationship between an African man and white woman sent him over the edge: its publication – actually, its cover, with an Italian woman cradled in her black lover's strong

[87] Qtd. in Dogliani, *Il fascismo*, cit., p. 294.
[88] On Italian colonial history and its legacy, see *Italian Colonialism*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, Palgrave, London 2002. For colonial theory and architectural solutions for separating Italians and Native peoples, see Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism*, Routledge, London 2007. For other recent explorations on the racial campaigns, more generally speaking, Francesco Cassata, *'La Difesa della razza'. Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista*, Einaudi, Torino 2008 and Valentina Pisanty, *La difesa della razza. Antologia 1938-1943*, Bompiani, Milano 2006.

arms – provoked not only the preventive censorship of books (which, unlike theatre, hadn't been subject to such control) but also the banning of black characters from the stage. On this front, Zurlo's task was sometimes easy: when possible, characters could become some other "other" and a play could win approval. However, theatrical treatments of liaisons between Italians and their colonial subjects (or any persons of color) would be absolutely barred. In this sense, silence was the best policy here too: a play about a "mixed" couple would suggest that that was a viable life choice – even if the choice was ultimately discouraged, and it usually was, by the work itself. (The Hollywood Code was the same, "miscegenation" being banned from films.) In any case, Zurlo judged the duce's inflexibility on this matter to be reminiscent of the Russia question: another phobia.[89]

After the alliance with Nazi Germany and the imposition of anti-Semitic racial laws in Italy, the same would hold true for the representation of Jews on stage. Mussolini's phobia here was boundless, according to the prefect, and the regime's strident efforts to carry on the anti-Jewish campaign meant that, over time, Zurlo's wiggle room shrunk considerably.[90] Initially, he was merely obligated to check the list of "non- Aryan" playwrights compiled, as he wrote, "con la diligenza imposta dall'inizio di una campagna da cui pareva dipendesse la salvezza del mondo," and Jewish authors were to be absolutely excluded from production. The sardonic censor commented about the time he realized that he had mistakenly approved a Jewish author and decided not to do anything about it, "pensando alla fine che non mi avrebbero fucilato." As was typical, the law was more exacting than reality, for the intelligence provided wasn't always clear, and occasionally indulgence or error prevailed.[91]

[89] See Bonsaver, *Censorship,* cit., for a lengthy explanation of the book in question, *Sambadu, amore negro.*
[90] The extraordinary efforts to sustain the anti-Jewish campaign in the press speaks to the difficulty of impressing this unexpected new policy on the hearts and minds of the population (the most infamous journal dedicated to this mission was entitled *La difesa della razza – Defending the Race*). For recent studies on the anti-Semitic campaign see the Cassata and Pisanty books in note 91.
[91] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 235-36.

Already with the Ethiopian campaign, Zurlo had communicated to Ciano and Mussolini that he wasn't enthusiastic about "supporting" (read: approving) texts that eagerly toed the party line; they agreed, as neither had ever been convinced that explicit propaganda was the best form of consensus-building in the theatre. The prefect felt similarly when the Jewish question emerged, for such solutions interested him neither from an aesthetic nor from an ideological point of view. And yet, artistic integrity was – at least formally – left out of the equation. Likewise, the censor claims that he never would've "forced" an interpretation to arrive at a negative ruling: this left him with the option of, essentially, taking advantage of questionable content to arrive more quickly at a recommendation for prohibition. Zurlo decided when to give and when to withhold indulgence and crafted his reports accordingly; it would then be up to the duce whether or not to follow suit, for, as the censor acknowledged, "dove entra il Re il padrone di casa perde i suoi diritti" – even at this late date, when, as Patrizia Ferrara has demonstrated, Zurlo acted with impressive autonomy and authority.[92]

The prefect's *Memorie* help us navigate what otherwise might be the perplexing conclusions offered by current scholarship, which tell us – at one and the same time – that "enemies of the race" were largely excluded from the stage, and that the theatre helped to circulate stereotyped images of Africans and Jews consonant with the racist ideologies that became fascist dogma in the later years.[93] In reality, the question of racism on Mussolini's stages needs to be explored in much further depth than can be done here: Zurlo is a good starting point, but hardly sufficient – not only because his work began only in 1931, but because it is inevitably partial (he could hardly discuss all 18,000 texts he read), and also tells us more about what was prohibited than what played. Nonetheless, his anecdotes and reflections help us review two sides of the same coin at once – censorship and propaganda – and therefore to call into question the reductive conclusions that have come down to us over

[92] *Ivi*, p. 237 and Ferrara, *Censura teatrale*, cit., on Zurlo's power in later years.
[93] See, for example, Dogliani, *Il fascismo*, cit., p. 300.

the years. What emerges from the censor's two chapters on Jews and Africans should by now hardly come as a surprise: unilateral bans were put in place only over time, and in the absence of clear-cut directives, serious thought and discussion determined the rulings made. The reasons for denying a visa – at least for Zurlo – were rarely dogmatic. On the contrary: pitfalls lied everywhere, even in the most "well-meaning" fascist text, and quite often these were the texts that faced the censor's most strenuous objections – though not because he championed the cause of the "enemy" or the "other."

In two similar cases, Zurlo rejected plays that meant to denigrate the "other" but through their various plot twists also presented a pretty unsavory view of the white, Christian Italian characters, too. In the first, an Italian professor goes to America and marries a woman who, unbeknownst to him, has a drop of black blood; when their child is born black, crisis ensues, for the father can't bring himself to love the child. The wife, Mirna, frees him from all obligation, obtaining an annulment and going away with the child. But for Zurlo this was unacceptable: the audience would judge too severely the father repulsed by his own child. What was more, there was a problem: the "black" American woman's behavior was far more noble than the Italian professor's.[94] In the second play, Bianca's parenting caused the censor grief. Her mistake was to marry a Jew and have his son, who grows up to be as stingy as his father; she eventually learns what Jews are all about, and encourages the son's fiancée to leave him. If this weren't enough to make her absolutely odious, she then turns out her son, who is basically forced to become a wandering Jew once the racial laws take effect. A rather horrified Zurlo commented on the non-Christian sentiments of this Italian woman and asked, "Quali consensi potrà trovare negli spettatori questa madre ariana che per essere antisemita scaccia suo figlio e lo maledice?"[95]

[94] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 255.
[95] *Ivi*, p. 236.

In these cases, two important points come to the fore: Zurlo's rejection stemmed first, if anything, from his own moral sensibility; and it was his sense of what the public would relate to, accept, or even comprehend (on an emotional rather than intellectual level) – at least as much as the directives from on high – that led him to a decree. The denigration of the enemy was hardly free of dangers, for works of art (even mediocre ones) rarely raise just a single issue; and these issues often came with the sort of collateral damage we see here. Upholding a newly decreed fascist racism wasn't acceptable if the text violated other principles, like those of morality, or even national pride. This was of course a problem in both of the cases here: attempting to malign the black or the Jew, the author unwittingly made the Italian look bad. This would've been as inadmissible to Mussolini and hierarchs as it would've been to the common bourgeois theatregoer. Simply put, even if a play successfully conveyed a "fascist" message – the inadvisability of racial mixing and the most stereotypical anti-Judaism – it could have adverse effects on other fronts. Mussolini's increasing "phobia" was in this sense well justified; many of these plays offered nothing: their messages were inadvertently problematic and they were, simply put, bad art. On these grounds, Zurlo tended to repel them; the public would only be exasperated by such ploys, he argued, and ultimately reject the propaganda offered them. Reasoning this way, he was Mussolini's perfect censor. Even if almost by accident.

The prefect's collaborators, however, were far more deliberate in their racist designs; and sometimes their militancy gained the upper hand. That fascism entered into its most extreme and ugly phase after the alliance with Hitler is undeniable, and theatre of course felt the impact. If – as we'll see further on – Mussolini was unsatisfied with Dino Alfieri as Minister of Popular Culture from 1937 to 1939, in Alessandro Pavolini, who took over in 1939 until 1943, he found a more proactive executor. Zurlo, in fact, judged the new Minister to be a cultured and generally intelligent individual, and was therefore disturbed by the path

he would take – a path that would lead him to intransigence at Salò and to Piazzale Loreto, where he was strung up alongside the duce once it had all come to an end. As Minister, Pavolini (whose brother was a talented theatre director) had claimed to understand and approve Zurlo's lack of enthusiasm for propaganda, but he also deliberately sought ways to promote explicitly pro-fascist performance.

Presented with a flagrantly anti-Semitic text for radio transmission, *Guida alla sbarra*, in 1942, a dismayed Zurlo wrote a lengthy report for Pavolini, in which he conveyed his distaste for the work and stressed, above all, the inaccuracies of its representation of Jews and their doctrine, to conclude – with an appeal to the ardent fascist – that the work, with such obvious flaws, would fail in its propagandistic purpose. But the hostility of the moment was clear in the Minister's response: Zurlo had balked at the play's treatment of the so-called "Protocols of Zion," which, he pointed out, everyone knew were an invention, but Pavolini told him, "I 'protocolli' sono falsi, però gli ebrei si regolano come se fossero autentici." Only some time later did he learn that the Minister – having talked to the Head of the Race Office – approved the text with some modifications and gave explicit instructions: do not send the approved script back to Zurlo! Afterwards, copied on a memorandum, Zurlo discovered that Pavolini's response to the text was "pienamente favorevole […] D'altra parte l'antiebraismo non è una tendenza, è una direttiva ufficiale."[96] Zurlo, master of the censorship house, lost his rights upon the entrance of the King, to be sure, but also of the Prince.

Pavolini's commitment to propaganda – and to anti-Semitism – we've already discussed in chapter two; for he was behind Bragaglia's 1941 staging of Lillian Hellman's *Little Foxes*, Jewish style, a production perfectly in keeping with his plan to create a new propagandistic theatre. Zurlo's protests against "doctoring" works, from both an artistic and practical point of view, fell on deaf ears. And, most disturbingly, his contention that such

[96] *Ivi*, pp. 246-251.

tricks wouldn't fool anyone was evidently wrong: the show whose "losca" Jewish family members and their environment "non potrebbero essere realisticamente meglio presentati" – was a lively success.[97]

Mussolini and His Doubles

The first act dialogue, between Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, goes like this:

> D: La vostra fede è grande come la mia, ma colui al quale voi preparate la via sarà vinto come Napoleone che realizzava appieno la vostra teoria.
> N: Vincerà invece, perché non ne ripeterà gli errori. La sua esperienza sarà grande come la sua volontà. Napoleone fu battuto dal freddo non dai Russi. In Italia non si gela.
> D: In Italia?
> N: L'uomo che salverà l'Europa dalla dissoluzione non può nascere che in Italia. L'oriente ha esaurito la sua vita.
> D: Sarà preda degli avversari.
> N: Li strangolerà con la sua mano potente e con la spada.
> D: Chi ferisce soffre.
> N: Ma la spada crea.
> D: Lotta eterna dunque tra l'oriente e l'occidente. Ma *ex oriente lux* diranno i padri.
> N: *Ex occidente dux* diranno i figli.

Wagner and Napoleon also appear – it is all, naturally, an excuse to explore the German's philosophy, particularly that of the Superman, and to celebrate that figure's certain coming. In the fifth act Nietzsche is no longer with us, but a disciple takes up his role as prophet, ecstatically declaring that his master's thought has not gone to waste: the new man will come! Chaos will be vanquished! Shame annihilated! Freedom won! The fascist anthem *Giovinezza* begins to play, and Rome and Mussolini appear upstage.

Zurlo never imagined the play would pass muster, notwithstanding the duce's immodesty: this was plain and simple bad taste, just the sort of thing that Mussolini tended to avoid. What was more, he was not to be represented in the flesh (though exceptions were made, as in the case of the Brancati/Bragaglia *Piave*) – to the dismay of countless budding

[97] *Ivi*, p. 296-98; ACS MCP UCT b. 39 f. 699; Citations come from the aforecited review in *Il Dramma* 368 (15 December 1941), p. 37.

propagandists who proffered texts in which Mussolini Superstar took center stage. In this case, however, the duce-censor surprised his partner with a flattered "Sì." But *Federico Nietzsche*, written and submitted in 1937 by well-known Czechoslovak playwright, fascist politician, and self-styled Superman, Frantisek Zavrel (1885-1947), never got its debut. No Italian company was interested in producing it.[98]

But if hagiography was possible, of course, so was execration; and numerous submissions – especially those starring Caesar and Napoleon – earned Zurlo's particular attention precisely because they could be deployed, yes, in exaltation, but also in denigration of dictators in general and therefore of the Boss, too. Zurlo's chapter, "Mussolini = Cesare? = Napoleon?" tells us that – the extra danger notwithstanding – the vetting process was essentially the same for these plays, or any others with characters that could easily be construed as the duce's alter-egos. Zurlo reviewed, reflected, and wrote his reports. Some plays passed, others didn't. Some were struck down because the parallel seemed too obvious, some because they violated morality or disrespected sovereign figures and disparaged their private lives, others still because they were politically problematic in ways that went beyond the representation of the dictator in question. Zurlo did recall that while Caesar created few problems (even the OND staged a giant production of Shakespeare's tragedy in Rome's Basilica of Maxentius in 1935), Napoleon's life and legend grew increasingly touchy as time went on, in particular after Ethiopia and increasing tensions with foreign powers. Often, the option used in these cases was suspension.

Mack Smith's assertion about the duce's immediate vetoes on potential satire is false, but this isn't to say that the duce wasn't touchy when these made their way to the boards. Infuriated in November of 1937 when Ciano told him about his experience at the Teatro Argentina, where he had gone to see *Napoleone unico* by the French playwright Paul Raynal,

[98] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., pp. 187-89.

he moaned to Claretta, "non ha potuto fare a meno che pensare a me tutto il tempo, sembrava fatto apposta." The play – which had been running for days – "era una cosa indegna. Anzitutto una profanazione di Napoleone, e poi una diminuzione degli uomini grandi: sembrava fatto contro di me." All the bourgeoisie of Rome, all the intellectuals and the philistines flocked to the theatre to see it, "contenti di poter sentire qualcosa contro di me," he raged.[99] But as both Petacci's and Ciano's comments on the episode suggest, this wasn't just a bruised ego talking. For Mussolini, these ribbings were symptomatic of an ongoing antifascism, a resistance to all his goals – thanks to the bourgeoisie's affection for its comfortable life. He would come up with some strategy after the Spanish war was over, he declared: "il carattere degli Italiani si deve creare nel combattimento." If, in Ciano's view, the Argentina was hosting an "anti-fascist rally" with that show, the Capo knew what the solution was: he shut it down. His son-in-law was clearly sympathetic to the choice, musing that "Platone censurava l'Odissea, e persino la musica se sembrava fiacca e deprimente."[100]

Amusing anecdotes aside, even with allusions to the Capo, *a priori* judgments were few and far between. Zurlo would've been able to award the visa without so much as flipping through the pages of Forzano's *Cesare*, for instance, as Mussolini's involvement with the writing of that piece was known to one and all. And yet, he made a cut: "È molto nobile piangere un nemico… quando è morto" was better left unsaid, Zurlo reasoned, for some people were apt to think of Caesar's twentieth-century avatar Mussolini, rather than of the great Pompey.[101]

The many figurations of Mussolini on stage – or at least on dramatic page – merit further attention. Many of the most interesting of these starred not the dictator's doubles, but

[99] Petacci, *Mussolini segreto*, cit., p. 92.
[100] Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario*, cit., p. 56.
[101] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p. 180; C.E.J. Griffiths, *The Theatrical Works of Giovacchino Forzano – Drama for Mussolini's Italy*, Edwin Mellen, New York 2000, pp. 159-77.

the man himself. That was one area where the rules were harder and faster, but they merit more attention than can be given here.

Fascist censorship, When All Is Said and Done

The duce's laments over *Napoleone unico* wouldn't be the last of the sort. His frustration over resistance to his attempts to remake Italians only increased as time went on, and the struggle to incorporate the theatre into that process, in fundamental ways, would never be won. Though the duce, as we've seen, had always sung the virtues of artistic freedom and "consenso non coatto,"[102] these didn't always coexist peacefully – or productively – with his designs. As time marched on, the failings of his policies made him weary.

Just a few months after the *Napoleone unico* debacle, in March of 1938, he spoke to Claretta about yet another script he had to veto, a comedy whose essential argument was one against marriage – wholly contrary to the regime's exaltation of the family and to the demographic campaign. A rather banal incident, perhaps. Except, Mussolini didn't speak of it a censorship problem; rather, the text was just one illustration of the regime's failure to produce a literature of its own: "Niente, niente, tutto da rifare la nostra produzione letteraria, è tutta sbagliata." He blamed then Minister of Popular Culture, Dino Alfieri, calling him "uno svanito." When Claretta suggested that perhaps he couldn't manage everything, her lover brooded, "Se tu vedessi in Germania, non c'e un rigo che non sia ortodosso."[103]

He probably blew a gasket, then, in May, when that pesky Sem Benelli reared his troublemaking head again. This time the play was *L'Orchidea*, and despite Zurlo's fine-toothed combing, Benelli's observations would ring out loud and clear as an anti-fascist attack. All of this prompted the duce to tell Ciano that there were still three bastions of anti-

[102] Yvon De Begnac, *Taccuini mussoliniani*, cit., p. 286.
[103] Petacci, *Mussolini segreto*, cit., p. 264.

fascism in Italy: funerals, jokes, and – here we have it – the theatre.[104] There was no blame put on Zurlo; the duce never pointed his finger in that direction. The troubles had nothing to do with the prefect's competencies in carrying out his task, but in the chosen *modus operandi*: Mussolini had never called for orthodoxy on the stage, but evidently hoped that it would one day naturally be reached. His relative liberality in censorship matched his reluctance to ask intellectuals to produce propaganda, for, as he had talked about with De Begnac, he believed a fascist culture would emerge because they – the writers of literature and creators of art – would give fascism its form, rather than the other way around. If the critical response to Brancati's *Don Giovanni involontario* could suggest that the fascist spirit was becoming internalized, the duce's irritation over the Napoleon incident, over the anti-marriage comedy, over Benelli, was instead the flowering of his realization that it wasn't. His vituperations against the bourgeois, his promises to either whip them into shape or smash them, multiplied and intensified.[105]

That censorship in any context has a repressive, prohibitive function is a matter of course. What's key to understanding the practice of it in the Mussolini-Zurlo era, however, is identifying it as one aspect of a much broader vision of cultural revolution to which the regime aspired. The centralization of theatrical censorship in 1931 – though it happened at the thespians' request – was part and parcel of the hyper-bureaucratization that characterized the period and, certainly, implied tighter control over what was seen on Italy's stages. It jurisdiction under Mussolini and the Ministry of the Interior reinforces this sense. But then, the migration of the Censorship Office to the Ministry of Press and Propaganda (and then to the MinCulPop) signaled a fundamental change: as Ferrara has astutely observed, it was a shift in function – from prohibition to pedagogy. This shift is reflected in the statistics of the

[104] Ciano, *Diario*, cit., p. 139.
[105] Practical attacks on bourgeois culture – the abolition of the *lei* form of address and such measures – also increased in the late 1930s, with promises of more severity "after the war" to follow; but from 1935, Italy was continuously involved in some conflict, from Ethiopia, to Spain, to WWII. See Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra*, cit., especially chapter 10, "Gli italiani non sono romani."

two periods, too: under the Ministry of the Interior (until 1935), the numbers read as followed: 87.13% scripts approved, 8.82% rejected, and 4.05% suspended, whereas under the auspices of what would become the MinCulPop (from 1935) they are 92.12% approved, 4.43% rejected, and 3.45% suspended. Such an increase in approved texts (and decrease in those rejected) ought not be read as a greater openness, but rather as the symptom of the new logic, Ferrara notes.[106] Earlier we saw that the ban on homosexuality as a theme was an example of the non-exceptionality of fascist censorship, especially in terms of relative severity; this pedagogic function is another, for the combination of restriction and recommendation, aesthetics and ethics, was a centuries-long tradition.[107] Also in this sense, then, the censorship of the *ventennio* represents continuity rather than either a parenthesis or rupture.

While Zurlo wasn't at all loyal to the cause of fascist propaganda, he was most certainly invested in the "elevation" of the prose theatre, and the evolution of censorial practice demonstrates the skill and confidence he acquired over time, stepping into the pedagogue's shoes. If since the Unification era the theatre – because it preached to the collective – had been thought fundamental in the molding of a new populace and inspiring its patriotic sentiment, it was only when the fascists came along and the duce declared the theatre's efficacy in stirring the collective passions that this viewpoint would take root in the mind's eye of the government – and, in turn, of the censorship office and those sectors of the Ministries involved in sponsoring performance. The consistency in approach, from this point of view, was such that even the last Minister of Popular Culture before Salò, Polverelli, described the function this way in a report to the Senate that almost seemed to justify the small number of banned scripts: fascist censorship was "diretta non a costringere la libertà

[106] Ferrara, *Censura teatrale*, cit., p. 103.
[107] See for example, on the pedagogic censorship in ecclesiastical circles of the sixteenth century, see Gabriele Pedullà, "Giovanni della Casa e il bon ton dell'umanista," in *Atlante della letteratura* II, Einaudi, Torino 2011, pp. 137-143.

artistica, ma a purificarla ed a elevarla."[108] Censorship's prohibitive function was complemented by an equally important – and tremendously paternalistic, no question – desire to model new dramaturgy for a new epoch. Mussolini found in the cultured and committed Leopoldo Zurlo the perfect man for the reeducation of both artists and audience.

The duce loved statistics, and the diligent record-keeping of Zurlo and his archivists, of the Ministry, and of the SIAE (The Italian Society of Authors and Editors) therefore provide us with numbers, numbers, and more numbers: lots of noteworthy details that put some key questions partly into perspective. For instance, surprising in light of comedy's undeniably subversive potential – as we've seen with Benelli and Brancati – is the fact that various types of comic performance (comedies, variety, and musical comedies) were submitted for approval in the greatest number – an impressive 81.67% – but comprised only 68.52% of those texts rejected by Zurlo. Tragedy and drama set off his alarm bells most often, making up 12.94% of the total submissions but 28.48% of those rejected.[109] One would need to examine the texts in question before daring too many general conclusions; morality, the author's nationality or the setting of the play, the particular subject matter of a given text, the moment in time the play is presented and the vicissitudes of Italy's place in the world, but most of all the message delivered by it: all of these things, and any combination of them, could converge to make a ban necessary – as by now should be clear.

That said, we might think it was more difficult to "adjust" a drama or tragedy; for comedy, once the required cleaning up was done (to eliminate inappropriate explicitness), it was often true that all was well that ended well. If comic drama is known to enact its moral instruction by offering the opportunity to laugh at the foibles of mischief makers, modern drama and tragedy don't always resolve themselves so harmoniously, even if, of course, they have pointed lessons as well. While we have to be careful not to exaggerate on this point – it

[108] *Scenario* XII.6 (1943), p. 187.
[109] Ferrara, *Censura teatrale,* cit., p. 105.

would be mistaken to suggest that the regime authorized only light-hearted fare, including during the war years – even Zurlo's accounts of his work reveals an extreme attention paid to the desire to make sure the public saw edifying plays. Zurlo naturally tended this way. But so did Mussolini, for his remaking of Italians required it (besides, he much preferred to laugh than he did to cry).[110] Regarding the *Orchidea* scandal, the Boss vented to Ciano that Benelli was always making a point of showing off the worst of the world: "In ogni casa c'è un cesso e tutti lo sanno. Ma non per questo si mostra all'ospite, quando viene a far visita."[111]

Scholars have noted Mussolini's aversion to unflattering depictions of Italians, which Zurlo mentioned several times; the discussion in this chapter of the prefect's response to racist dramas, where he doubted the audience's ability to accept negative depictions of the characters involved, puts into perspective what might otherwise seem a sort of silly, chauvinistic reflex. Instead, we might think of it as a desire – however ingenuously, from an artistic point of view, it was transformed into action – to see role models walk across the Italian boards much like the duce's impulse to model behavior in his own appearances. It's not hard to agree with Silvio d'Amico, who conceded – in the 1952 review of Zurlo's memoirs that was also a refutation of Brancati's *Ritorno alla censura* – that "la storia della Censura sia piuttosto tragicomica."[112] Even if, as I hope these stories and reflections show, theatrical censorship under Zurlo, the Ministers, and Mussolini was nothing less than a political process whose complexity and seriousness hasn't yet been understood – largely because it hasn't been taken seriously. One scholar's commentary is representative, in its declaration that censorship on Mussolini's watch "fu espressione di un governo totalitario con tutte le sue contraddizioni e con tutte le ineffabili smancerie": a position that recognizes censorship as more than the heaving of an abstract and totalizing "fascist mentality" on the

[110] Rachele remembered how much the duce loved vaudeville and variety, while comic and historical films held his interest but sad or romantic ones would drive him away. Rachele Mussolini and Albert Zarca, *Mussolini, an Intimate Biography*, Morrow, New York 1974, p. 38.
[111] Ciano, *Diario*, cit. p. 139.
[112] d'Amico, *Cronache*, V.III, p. 549.

theatregoing masses but nevertheless reduces its complexities to the regime's silliness, and tacitly, lack of true ideology.[113] But, censorship was politics – in the fullest sense of the word: the enactment of policies and changes to them; the management of philosophical debates, disagreements, of social blunders and diplomatic crises; the partial forsaking of ideals to economic or social forces and changing tides outside of the government's control; and finally, of course, also the imposition of fascist tents, in keeping with Mussolini's revolutionizing aspirations.

The intricacy of the system flies in the face of our abstracts notions of what a "regime" is – a nebulous thing rather than a group of men making real decisions – and our stereotyped ideas of the totalitarian dictator ruling with an iron fist. But it just as strongly challenges opposing claims that censorship decisions weren't made on political (ideological) grounds at all. This bipolar misunderstanding of theatrical censorship comes in many ways from the simple fact that detailed attention hasn't yet been given to those thousands of scripts gathering dust in the archive; few have seen how the moral and political – on the level of content – were inextricably braided.[114] More substantially, still, not many scholars who've investigated censorship have taken into account that Mussolini and Zurlo (and Ciano, Alfieri, Pavolini, De Pirro, Polverelli) had revolutionary ambitions; they operated with the understanding that fascism was – to use Bontempelli's words – "tutto un orientamento della vita, pubblica e individuale: ordinamento compiuto e totale, cioè pratico insieme e teorico, intellettuale e morale, applicazione e spirito," and this was as true when they were devising

[113] A sense reinforced by the fact that he peppers his account of Zurlo's story with so many exclamation points that every measure ever taken by the censorship duo is implied to be absolutely ludicrous: "Altro problema: il suicidio!", "Almeno secondo il parere dei soloni del partito fascista!", "Cose veramente da matti!" Carlo Di Stefano, *La censura teatrale in Italia (1600 - 1962)*, Cappelli editore: Bologna, 1964. The study dates to the period when, in fact, studies of fascism still tended to deny that it had any cultural proposals or even ideology of its own; the implicit logic of Di Stefano seems to be this one.

[114] A notable exception here is Pietro Cavallo, who has studied the texts thematically, but his concern isn't censorship; rather, he catalogs the texts according to their propagandistic relevance. *Immaginario e rappresentazione: il teatro fascista di propaganda*, Bonacci, Roma 1990.

thankfully unsuccessful propaganda spectacles as when they vetted scripts.[115] Put another way, fascist censorship's pedagogic method wasn't just about saying "no" – it was about finding new ways to say "yes." And so Zurlo sat, for nearly thirteen years, conversing, and correcting, reasoning and revising, thousands of scripts that left him as depressed as they did Mussolini, for the vast majority of them were, despite ambitions, standard commercial fare that wasn't often terribly problematic but was even less often inspiring, from any point of view.

An important aspect of censorship – as just about everyone who works on fascist Italy notes – is the fear that leads to self-suppression. A general consensus has it that the artists and intellectuals of Mussolini's Italy, between the threat of censorship and, conversely, the promise of reward, were led to constant, internalized, self-censorship: something even more disheartening and corrosive than that imposed directly by the duce, the Ministers, or functionaries like Zurlo, because of course therein would lie fascism's real victory. That such psychological duress impacted the *ventennio*'s thespians is confirmed by a rather unlikely source: the August 1943 number – therefore published just after Mussolini's ousting – of the theatrical magazine *Scenario*, which until that issue had been edited by De Pirro who, in joining Salò, left the task to his assistant, Mario Corsi. There the opening essay, signed "Scenario," declared:

> Il teatro nostro ha dovuto sopportare per molto tempo una tortura che lo avrebbe ucciso, se non avesse avuto forze vitali così generose e la fortuna inapprezzabile di avere trovato negli organi censori tanta intelligente comprensione. Ma la censura era nell'aria, nelle cose, negli uomini qualunque, da per tutto. Si poteva incontrarla all'improvviso, anche agli angoli delle strade, anonima, misteriosa, inflessibile, talvolta feroce. Di qui lo stato di continua inquietudine, di incertezza, di agitazione che era negli autori, nei critici sopra tutto, di qui l'asperità delle polemiche di critici e di autori, di

[115] Massimo Bontempelli, "Arte fascista," cit., p. 416. The proactive and "riformist" mentality of the stage can be seen in this way as part of what Emilio Gentile has called the "heroic pedagogy" of fascism, the attempts to create a modernist "national ethic" that would express itself not just in new political institutions but in an entirely novel lifestyle. See *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*, cit., pp. 39-41.

> giovani e di vecchi, di rassegnati e di insofferenti, di tradizionalisti e di ricercatori.[116]

The point of self-censorship has been underlined so often in studies of fascist culture that it's become banal. Nonetheless, it's important that we take such observations seriously, for imagining fascism's climate of fear is crucial to an understanding of the experience of the *ventennio*. Contemporaries, moreover, were cognizant of the role self-muzzling held – especially as far as journalism was concerned – and enemies of the regime didn't shrink from noting it, as we see in a cartoon published in 1928 in the English magazine *Punch* and reprinted by the openly anti-fascist *Il Becco Giallo* (forced to emigrate to France); there, Mussolini vaunts a show dog, who is the Italian Press: "You see ladies and gentlemen, *I* don't muzzle him. The sagacious animal puts on his own muzzle himself. The freest dog in the world!"

At the same time, such assertions have often been misdirected: for instance, to explain why almost no interesting drama was produced in the 1930s, as if the regime had sucked the creativity right out of its intellectuals. In this logic, "rigorous" self-denial "led to a safe but frequently dull repertoire."[117] But arguments that fascism killed the creative spirit can be countered at every turn, with a look at art and architecture of the period, or narrative masterpieces by the likes of Bontempelli and Brancati, Savinio and Moravia, Landolfi and Bilenchi, or the flourishing of the art of directing (addressed in chapter two), not to mention the rebellious actors who snuck lampooning imitations of the duce into their live performances. Likewise, in other contexts, studies have persuasively argued for a direct link between censorship and creativity: being unable to say something one way meant inventing another. Zurlo's invitation to Bragaglia to make a fool of the censor's office reminds us of just that. Further, regime officials and intellectuals seem to have found at least some sort of

[116] Scenario XII.8 (August 1943), p. 257.
[117] Thompson, "Organisation," cit., p. 103.

equilibrium. Regarding literary production, historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat has observed that the two worked together; censorship "functioned less through heavy-handed repression than through collaboration with authors who negotiated with authorities over a questionable tone or turn of phrase."[118] This proved true not just for the novelists Ben-Ghiat writes of, or in aforementioned cases like Sem Benelli's, but for countless playwrights – stars and novices alike – who benefitted from Zurlo's attention.[119]

Likewise, claims regarding self-gagging have sometimes taken on rather simplistic premises, suggesting that the very existence of preemptive censorship – which of course was around before and after fascism and in democratic countries, too – "serviva efficacemente a dissuadere ogni autore, ogni attore, ogni impresario teatrale dal battere strade che non fossero più che sicure dal punto di visto ideologico."[120] And yet we've seen how rarely this was the case; the dreadfully overworked Zurlo would've had a much easier task if this had been so. Certainty wasn't to be had, for many points were so fine that authors wouldn't have known how to anticipate them. And, in the end, there may well be just as much evidence supporting the idea that authors worked to sneak things by as there is that they toed the line.

Psychological submission, then, didn't have much to do with Zurlo's, or the duce's, red and blue pencils, or even with a particular violence of fascist censorship, which, in point of fact, didn't exist. Arguably, it wasn't the severity (and attendant clarity) of directives that could've put dramatists or producers in a difficult position, but instead – wholly to the contrary – the unorthodoxy, or at least flexibility, of the process.[121] Self-constraint is often as driven by uncertainty of result as by the promise of punishment, after all. And this speaks to

[118] Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, cit., pp. 47-48.
[119] The prefect's patient and skillful work on this front has even been called "ambiguo e irritante" by one scholar, an imposition on the author's creativity not because Zurlo crossed words out but because he went so far as to rewrite or to suggest alterations that were more appropriate: Antonini, *Un palco per l'Ovra*, cit., p. 22.
[120] This particular example is Pasquale Iaccio, *Scena*, cit., p. 15.
[121] Brancati had seen the "flexibility" of fascist censorship – in part due to functionaries' tendency to rebel – in positive terms, with respect to the hegemony of DC morality that, from his point of view, robbed officials of the desire to rebel. See *Ritorno alla censura* (in Brancati, *Romanzi e saggi*, ed. Marco Dondero, Milano, Mondadori 2003, pp. 1499-1568)and my commentary on it in "Il censore censurato," cit.

the larger issue here, which emerges as the revelatory element of the *Scenario* note cited above: if fascism succeeded in instilling a sort of a timid self-abnegation, it did so not with the bureaucratic process of script evaluation, but with violence and the threat of it. With a climate of fear created long before Zurlo and Mussolini took those fat grease pencils in hand. If Italian theatre artists were cowered by the Mussolini regime, it's not because the stage was regulated – as it had been before and would be after – but because they saw Benedetto Croce's home ransacked, Antonio Gramsci thrown in jail, Piero Gobetti and Arturo Toscanini beaten to a pulp, Cesare Pavese and Carlo Levi sent to *confino* … and so much more.[122]

We don't have to rely on Zurlo's memoirs to know all of this, though. We have a wire tap to prove it. The call is one made by Mussolini to the prefect, over reports on a variety show by "quel pagliaccio di Totò" (the duce's words) that clearly spoofed the party and, more specifically, the directive to replace the supposedly foreign "lei" form of Italian address with the more authentic "Voi":

> Z: Duce, ho capito perfettamente di che cosa si tratta, ed ho sotto gli occhi l'originale del copione, a quale ho dato, personalmente, il visto, dopo averlo attentamente esaminato.
> M: E allora?
> Z: Evidentemente si è esagerato…
> M: Non ci sono dubbi sui riferimenti!
> Z: Esatto; ma bisogna tener conto che un teatro di rivista non è certamente la direzione del PNF. La satira, quando è fatta con intelligenza e contenuta nei giusti limiti, non può e non deve considerarsi offensiva; e ciò proprio in base alle intelligenti e spregiudicate direttive impartitemi personalmente dall'Eccellenza Vostra.
> M: (*con evidente orgoglio*) Questo è vero: sono stato proprio io a dirvi di essere, in un certo senso, di manica larga… quindi…
> Z: Appunto, duce. Io pensavo a quelle parole quando, dopo gli opportuni tagli, mi son deciso a concedere il visto. Poi vi assicuro che, se leggeste il copione, ridereste anche voi…
> M: Ma, a Palazzo Littorio, la pensano diversamente…
> Z: Le battute erano due, la prima diceva: "Se tornasse Gali*voi*…" "Galivoi?...", a cui Totò rispondeva, "Sì, il 'lei' è abolito." L'altra riguardava il cambiamento della moneta rumena da *lei* in *voi*... (*ridono*) .. e poi, non

[122] For a comprehensive survey of repression and violence toward intellectuals during the *ventennio*, see Marco Bresciani, "La repressione degli intellettuali sotto il regime fascista," and its rich bibliography, in *Atlante della letteratura italiana* III, Torino, Einaudi 2011, pp. 623-44.

> bisogna ignorare i commenti al provvedimento. Solo in tale maniera potevo dare la sensazione di non essere sempre con fucile spianato.
> M: È giusto.[123]

Thus was the watchdog of the Italian stage forever being watched.

That Mussolini the censor and his right hand man were both wire-tapped underscores the climate of fear discussed above; that *Scenario* spoke of the "torture" that was the *ventennio* for the theatre leaves no doubt that a feeling of suppression, repression, oppression lurked beneath the surface of daily life – at the very least. And yet, that the same *Scenario* article pointed to the censor's intelligence, that even d'Amico and Brancati – who lambasted the regime after its fall – could speak of a sensitive and sensible man whose mentality was "tutt'altro che fascista" and acknowledge his "discretion" reminds us that, prefect or not, Zurlo was in the end more than a watchdog.[124] His recorded conversation with the duce reiterates the point: theirs was a system where context, contingency, and discussion ruled; where sometimes the watchful gaze was willingly averted, and sometimes, instead, the fist came crashing down. It's not necessarily untrue that "il teatro fu costretto a piegarsi agli interessi del regime," but we ought to know what this really meant in practice – and the story of the Mussolini-Zurlo censorship duo goes a long way toward telling us.[125] The myriad of stories recounted by Zurlo and others that have been unearthed since – including here – leave the impression that the proverbial exceptions were the actual rule. As we've seen, however, this was anything but simple pragmatism: it was a complex negotiation aimed, yes, at

[123] Ugo Guspini, *L'Orrechio del regime. Le intercettazioni telefoniche al tempo del fascismo,* Mursia, Milano 1973, p. 123. Guspini apparently misdates the interception, to 1934, as the abolition of the "lei" came only in 1938.
[124] Silvio d'Amico, *Il teatro non deve morire*, Edizione dell'Era Nuova, Roma 1945, p. 41; Brancati, *Ritorno alla censura*, cit., p. 1508 (which only refers to Zurlo as "the first prefect," evidently in an attempt to draw attention away from the fact that he was in effect complimenting *the* censorship official of the *ventennio*).
[125] Sedita, *Gli intellettuali di Mussolini,* p. 110.

keeping the peace and maintaining control, but above all at the "fascist socialization"[126] of all Italians, integral to what Mussolini hoped was an ongoing revolution.

[126] La "socializzazione fascista" is Emilio Gentile's characterization of the regime's mobilization and fascistization of the masses. See *La via italiana al totalitarismo. Il partito e lo Stato nel regime fascista*, Carocci, Roma 2002 [1995], p. 187.

Conclusion: A Broader View of Fascist Theatre

Writing in his *Tempo* column on February 25, 1943, Massimo Bontempelli recalled Pirandello's Teatro d'Arte with a condensed version of that 1933 *Scenario* biography of the enterprise, in which he had so proudly touted, "C'era Mussolini." This time around, just a few months prior to the regime's collapse, the now anti-fascist writer cut that "C'era Mussolini," and every other reference to the duce's role in the affair: no longer did he care to flaunt what the Head of Government had done.[1] He wasn't alone.

In 1944, Silvio d'Amico began to write *Il teatro non deve morire*, a call for the rebirth of Italian dramatic theatre after a disastrous *ventennio*, in which the regime's interventions could best be summarized – he jibed – with the Duchess of Chevreau's crack about Richelieu: "il bene, lo fece male; e il male, lo fece bene."[2] At every turn throughout the 80-page essay, the indefatigable idealist when it came to the art found reason for complaint, for if he couldn't rightly charge the regime with doing nothing (at least the fascists, unlike their liberal predecessors, did support the theatre), he dimissed its massive efforts with laments that it should have done more or otherwise. Given d'Amico's authoritative position, *Il teatro non deve morire*, published in 1945, came to serve as the first major history of the theatre under fascism.

Ever since, despite the comprehensive research in the 1980s and 90s by scholars like Scarpellini and Pedullà, whose studies demonstrated the extent of the regime's interventions, that book's characterizations have guided common understanding of the *ventennio*'s dramatic production, which amounts to a series of predictable but not necessarily accurate contentions: what theatre the State did produce was propaganda and therefore devoid of artistic merit (unworthy of further investigation); even before strict centralized regulations appeared, fear

[1] Massimo Bontempelli, *Tempo* No. 196, 25 February 1943, np: recovered in GRIb68.
[2] d'Amico, *Il teatro non deve morire*, cit., p. 61.

of retaliation or marginalization led to dramatists' excessive self-censorship, killing the creative spirit; hyper-nationalism resulted in creative border-closing, which caused national production to suffer for lack of vital exchange with foreign artists and innovations; likewise, the campaign against dialect culture marginalized potential audience members and talented artists who could have given rise to the new Italian theatre. Even underscoring that the fascists' efforts were unprecedented, in his 1994 study Pedullà follows Scarpellini – and Meldolesi before them – in stressing the control the regime imposed on the theatre industry, which faced "una sottomissione quasi completa alle volontà governative." And yet, as Pedullà himself acknowledges, "in realtà, sappiamo ancora poco sul quale teatro venga rappresentato durante il fascismo."[3] In other words, while in 1994 we seemed to know what the "submission to the government's will" meant as far as institutional regulation was concerned, the practical ramifications, from an aesthetic point of view, still escaped us.

Nineteen years later, this is still in large part true. While of course specialists – Italian scholars, in particular – have produced valuable studies on individual figures or problematics, these haven't managed to break out of the confines of theatre history studies or, consequently, alter the discourse on fascist culture in any fundamental way. But, as I've attempted to show in the chapters of this study, even the general claims mentioned above greatly simplify the reality of theatrical programming under Mussolini's government. In my opinion, the only way to restore the complexity of the moment – and therefore its reality – is to unite the discussions of the institutional and aesthetic. The principle way I've tried to achieve this is by placing Mussolini at the center of the story. Likewise, in the chapters presented here, by actually looking at the theatre produced (through partial readings of texts that were censored, analyses of shows put on the boards, etc.), I've aimed to highlight the often great distance between regulation of the theatre on paper and in practice.

[3] Gianfranco Pedullà, *Il teatro italiano*, cit., p. 38, 42.

At the same time, there is a certain risk in focusing on the "big names" as I've largely done here: d'Annunzio, Bragaglia, Pirandello, Brancati, to name a few, were special – if in different ways – and therefore their stories cannot always be held as representative. Although I've made efforts to show that, even in their exceptionality, their cases can help us better understand some of Mussolini and the regime's fundamental principles for administrating the arts and cultivating relationship with intellectuals, it is true that we must be wary of reinterpreting the exception as the rule. These artists' stories must be placed in context, and to bring that context into view, a shift of our gaze is necessary.

Here I turn at least partly away from Mussolini to recoup a discussion of the regime's cultural institutions and of the vast apparatus of popular theatre iniatives erected by the regime. These were, after all, the centerpiece of the government's subvention of the theatre – the recipient of most of its stores, monetary and creative. (In the end, this fact was the cause of most of d'Amico's and other intellectuals' very legitimate frustrations.) There is still more to say about Mussolini as a man of the theatre: his collaborations with Giovacchino Forzano merit further study, for they help to complete the conversation about Mussolini as critic, giving us further information on what excited and moved him, and also what sort of educative and propagandistic potential he saw in the plays that he helped Forzano to write. Likewise, Mussolini appeared as a character in a vast number of plays, from those written by some of our protagonists here (GBS, Brancati), to those by anonymous Italians hoping to win prizes or merely pay homage to their duce.[4] These texts tell us a great deal about the Mussolini of the popular imagination, and how he was seen as the sort of historic (already!), heroic stuff of which drama was made. These are avenues of the *Mussolini, Man of the Theatre* story I have yet to explore.

[4] See Pietro Cavallo, *Immaginario e rappresentazione*, cit.

The information that follows here, on the other hand, is an extension of the tale of Mussolini the Impresario: what was the result of the attention to mass theatre projects in the thirties, and what sort of continuity was there between it and the backing of such figures as Pirandello and Bragalia? Is it fair to consider the art and popular theatre wholly at odds? I can't yet answer all of these questions, but I can begin to round out the picture, and in so doing begin to pose some questions on the historiography of the theatre of the *ventennio*. Some of this research I have already published, and here in fact I will include the graphic realizations from an existing essay.[5]

One of the commonplaces of theatre history tells us that the crisis of the theatre – if almost everyone agreed on something, it was the theatre's imminent expiry – was in large part provoked by the rise of the cinema, especially sound films. It is true that movies were more popular than live spectacles, whether they be theatre, various entertainment (*balli*, *orchestrine*, *rievocazioni storiche*, etc.), or sports. However, **Tables 1-3** do reveal a direct correspondence between price and popularity: the cheaper the ticket, the higher the attendance (theatre seats cost approximately 2.75 times more than a place at the movies).[6] On this point d'Amico faulted Mussolini, arguing that the dictator was more interested in film than theatre so he helped the former thrive while watching the latter die, even if Benito's son Vittorio – director of an important film magazine – attested just the opposite.[7] The cinema did, indeed, enjoy greater popularity than the theatre in the thirties, but tickets bought and sold tell us more about the public's behavior than about the regime's practices, although it is worth noting that upon greater commitment on the part of the regime between 1935-1937, ticket sales and box office takings both increased. What's more, several of the regime's theatre for the masses projects aimed precisely to provide live entertainment at *prezzi*

[5] Patricia Gaborik, "Lo spettacolo del fascismo," cit.
[6] Società Italiana degli Editori ed Autori, *Lo Spettacolo in Italia. Annuario statistico.* SIAE, Roma 1936-1942 (the graphics here pertain to 1937).
[7] d'Amico, *Il teatro non deve morire*, cit., pp. 52-58.

popolari, a sign of the hierarchs' awareness that people would be drawn to the theatre if they could afford to go.

Tables 1-3

attività	giornate	biglietti venduti	incassi (lire)	prezzi medi
teatro	73 805	21 426 230	98 001 690,28	4,57
cinema	543 153	313 974 471	525 117 382,16	1,67
sport	25 064	8 262 298	30 890 606,08	3,74
intrattenimenti vari	513 407	56 634 076	94 070 430,54	1,66
Totale	1 155 429	400 297 075	748 080 109,06	1,87

Tabella 1. Tutti gli spettacoli: giornate di rappresentazione, biglietti venduti, incassi e prezzi medi (1937).

attività	rappresentazioni	biglietti	incassi (lire)
prosa	35 302	7 239 582	26 354 894,01
teatro dialettale	6966	2 970 294	9 524 647,98
lirica e balletti	2448	3 159 982	31 800 589,90
concerti	3232	1 158 557	4 344 827,90
operetta	3240	1 602 274	5 706 249,05
rivista	4071	2 255 641	12 227 991,00
varietà	6261	1 791 899	6 120 898,92
burattini	10 387	848 064	1 169 867,57
saggi culturali	1898	399 937	751 723,95
Totale	73 805	21 426 230	98 001 690,28

Tabella 2. Il teatro: numero delle rappresentazioni, numero dei biglietti venduti, incassi (1937).

attività	giornate di spettacolo	biglietti	incassi (lire)
1 film	450 039	234 633 663	382 776 678,87
2 o piú film	69 023	50 137 479	65 415 849,74
cinema-rivista	7957	10 546 505	27 684 746,86
cinema-operetta	655	909 675	2 203 851,04
cinema-prosa	1776	1 979 563	4 097 508,54
cinema-varietà	13 703	15 767 586	42 938 747,11
Totale	543 153	313 974 471	52 517 382,16

Tabella 3. Il cinema: giornate di spettacolo, numero dei biglietti venduti e incassi (1937).

The bulk of the data presented here concerns the 1930s, when the regime's institutionalization of spectacle reached its height and is thus most indicative of the government's ambitions. However, actions taken in the 1920s, a period of transformation and exploration, are nonetheless fundamental for understanding the aesthetic politics of the *ventennio* and the respective places of theatre and film (and also radio and the nascent

television) within those politics. It is often reported that Mussolini declared the cinema "l'arma più forte," and the sector was heavily sponsored from the mid-30s onward. But when we take a longer and broader view of all the government did to sustain and contribute to the performance industries, the fascist regime's theatrical initiatives emerge as more committed and extensive, the theatre more essential to the unification (and fascistization) of the Italian masses. **Table 4**, appended at the end of this section, is a chronology of fascist technologies that provides this longer and broader view.

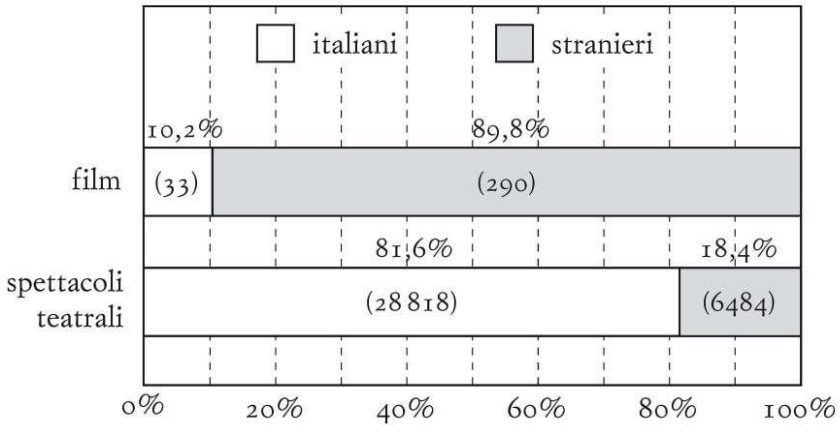
For more than a decade, Mussolini conceded only half-measures to help the struggling commercial film industry, declaring that documentaries were better tools of "education and persuasion."[8] In fact, until Galeazzo Ciano created the Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia (the DGC) under the auspices of the Sottosegretariato per la Stampa e la Propaganda in 1934, the only substantial fascist contribution to the film industry was the transformation of the Sindacato istruzione cinematografica in November of 1925 into the Istituto LUCE, an entity of the State and its official news and propaganda film producer. In other words, for nearly a decade Mussolini's interest in the cinema was basically limited to its documentary capacities.

Even as government involvement and interest in the commercial sector increased in the 30s, its practices were "schizophrenic," in Vito Zagarrio's words.[9] For instance, laws privileged Italian production in a market dominated by Hollywood, but producers had trouble meeting the demands of these regulations, which therefore created more pressure than relief. Because the regime was only nominally interested in the possible advantages the industry afforded, it tended to regulate rather than help produce, and therefore the industry struggled

[8] On film during the *ventennio*, see Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano Volume secondo*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1993; Lorenzo Quaglietti, "Il cinema degli anni trenta in Italia: primi elementi per una analisi politico-strutturali," in *Materiali sul cinema italiano 1929/1943*, Undicesima Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, Pesaro, 1975, pp. 283-330; Vito Zagarrio, "Schizofrenie del modello fascista," in *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 5, Marsilio, Venezia 2006, pp. 37-60; Philip Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso: fascismo e mass media*, tr. it. di G. Ferrara, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1975.
[9] Zagarrio, "Schizofrenie del modello fascista," cit.

to fully benefit from the regime. The DGC appeared in part an antidote to the counter-productive and haphazard regulation that profited neither sector nor government. From this point on, but especially as the thirties drew to a close, the regime would increase its support *and* its control of the industry in all areas, from production and distribution to censorship and movie hall management. The flourishing of entities like the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (1935) and, most famously, Cinecittà (1937) is certainly testament to the cinema's mounting importance to creating a fascist culture; yet the recurrent time lag between the births of such institutions and their adoption by the government is indicative of Mussolini's reluctance to take responsibility for the industry. In fact, the major push to take control of filmic enterprises happened very late indeed: La Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica passed under regime control in 1938, Cinecittà in 1939, CINES became public in 1941, when there was an unprecedented politicization of cultural production after the alliance with Hitler's Germany and the outbreak of war. One aspect of the impact on both cinematic and theatrical production in this period of new and difficult foreign relations can be seen in **Tables 5, 6, and 7**, here:[10]

Table 5: Foreign and Italian films and theatrical performances (1937)



[10] For additional statistics, see ISTAT, *Annuario Statistico Italiano,* Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Roma 1922-1945.

Table 6: Foreign plays by author's nationality (1937).

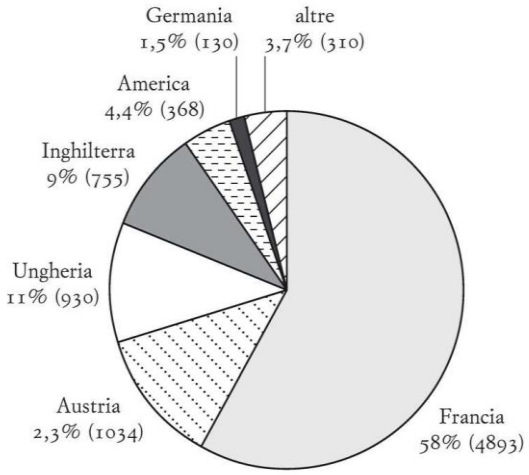
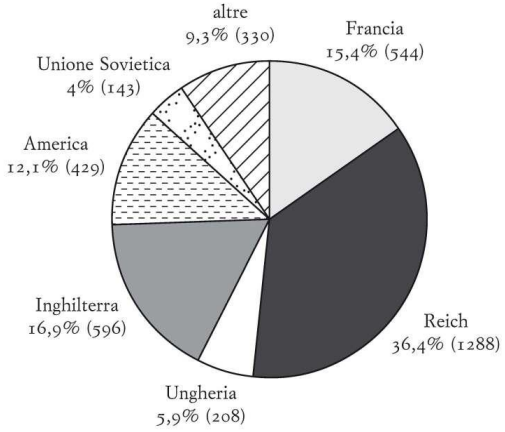
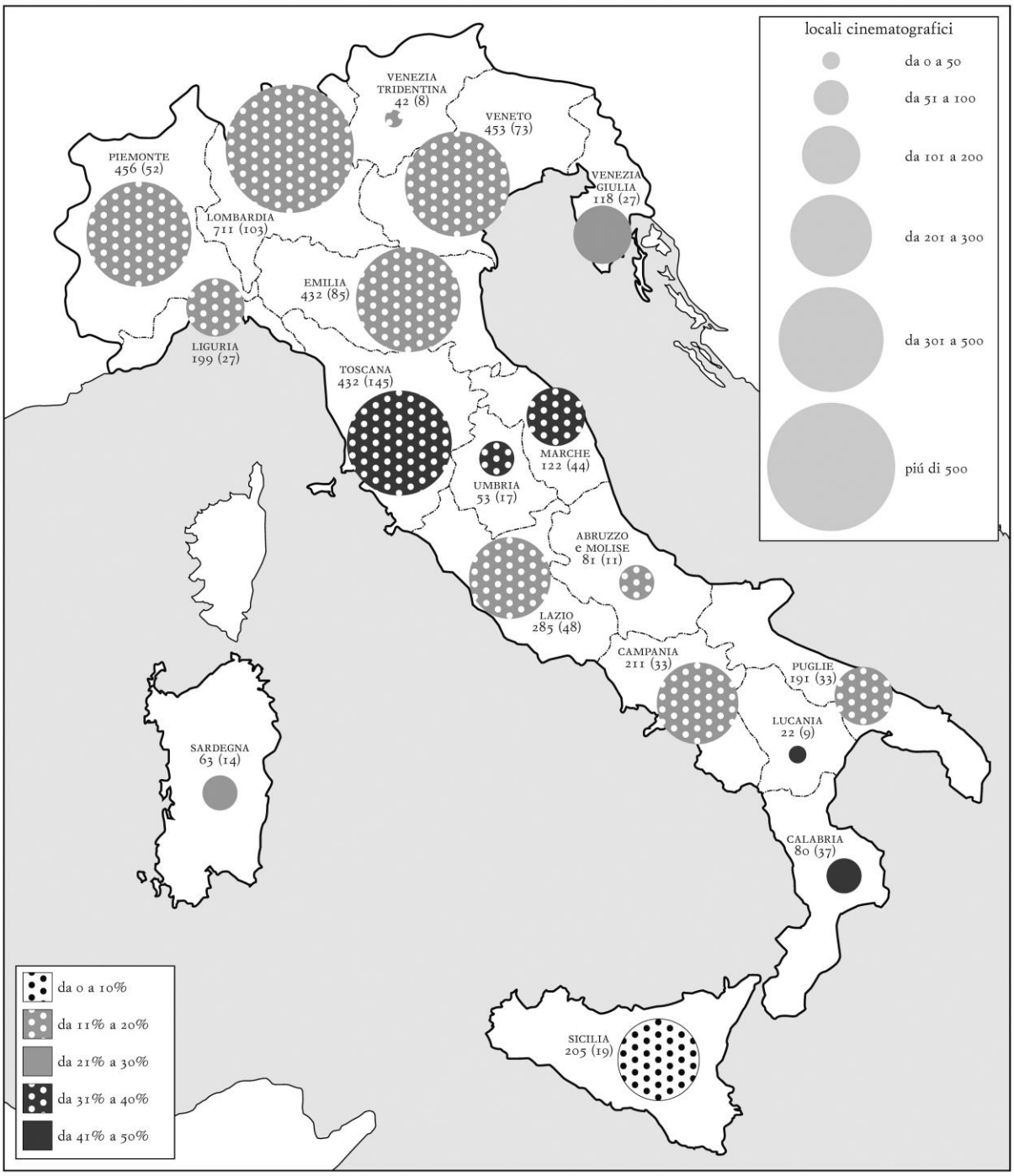


Table 7: Foreign plays by author's nationality (1941).

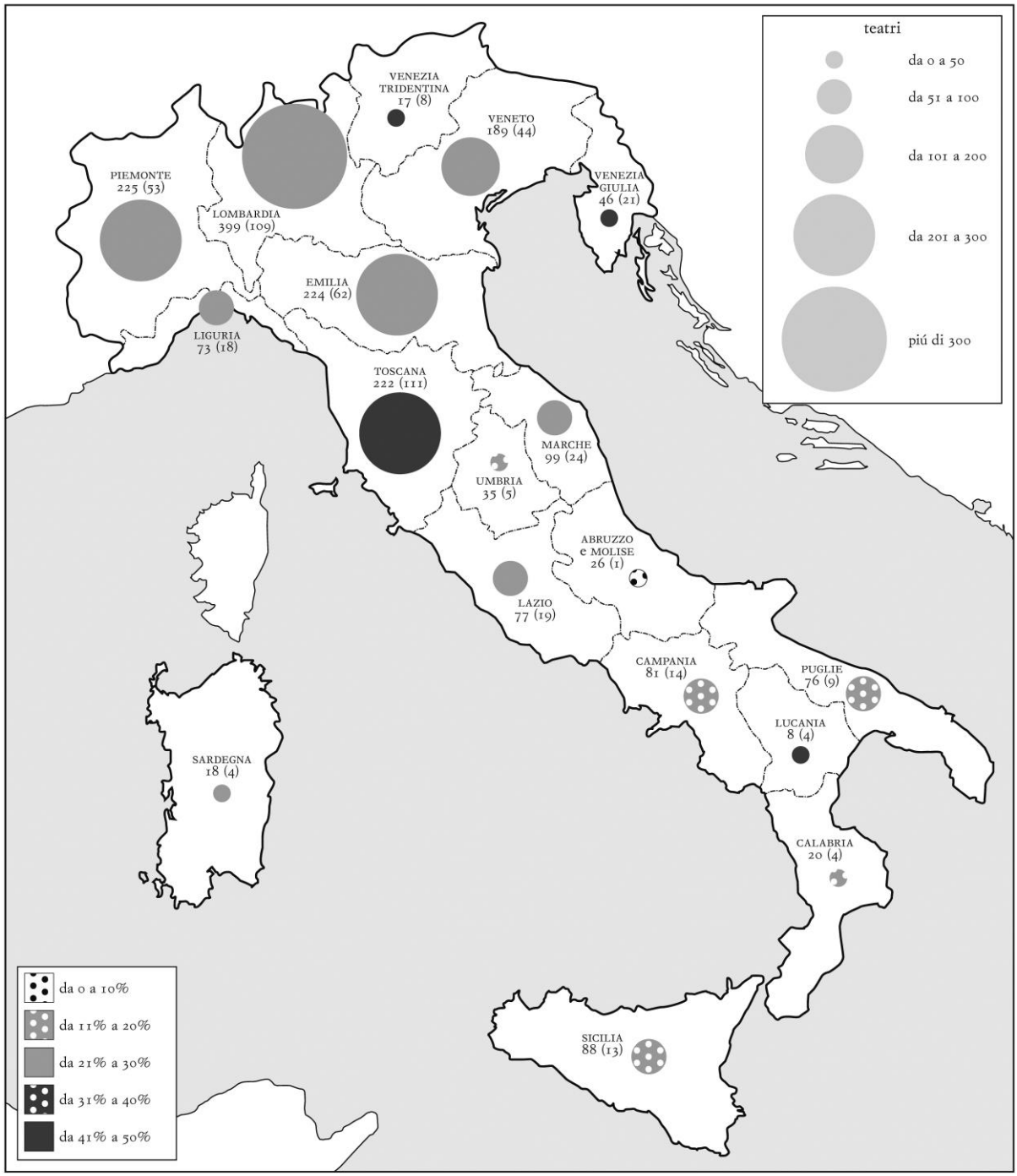


Map 1, on the following page, indicates the level of commitment to providing – and regulating down to level of selecting films to be shown – cinematic entertainment. The number of *sale* run by the government (either by the PNF or the OND, fascist Italy's chief arbiter of leisure-time activity) was modest, less than 20%, in the majority of regions. Perhaps most surprising is the extensive intervention in Calabria and Lucania, an indication that the government acted where its assistance was needed most, and that, at least when it came to cultural activities, the South was not as neglected as common thinking would have it.

Map 1: Movie theatres, October 1937. These totaled 4156; those run by the OND or PNF (numbers indicated in parentheses for each region) amounted to 785, or 18.9%.



Map 2: Theatres, March 1939. These totaled 1931; those run by the OND or PNF (numbers indicated in parentheses for each region) amounted to 525, or 27.2%. In Libya there were 8 theatres, 2 (25%) of which were run by the government.



In comparison, **Map 2** yields some significant findings: while it perhaps conforms more tightly to our expectations, as the central and northern regions tended to have higher numbers of regime-run houses (with the exception of Lucania, Sardegna, and colonial Libya), on the whole, the government managed higher percentages of live theatres than movie

houses: only six regions saw fewer than 20% of its theatres run by the PNF or OND in 1939 whereas 11 regions saw the same low percentage of its movie *sale* under regime management in 1937. Viewed more comprehensively, the average percentage for theatres looms at 26.2% and for movie houses at 22.1%. Here the difference is not extreme, but already the live art begins to appear as the weapon of choice.[11]

It seems possible that Mussolini and his culture ministers began to place more trust in technological forms of spectacle because their theatrical projects were so successful, even if the duce's behaviors suggest that he had greater faith in the live art. Government support and management of the theatre had a very different evolution than the cinema's; whereas early in his tenure he resisted the film (and to a lesser extent radio) industry's advances, Mussolini courted theatrical practitioners from day one. He seemed to have a real desire to contribute to the salvation the maestri of Italian theatre yearned for, despite d'Amico's claim that "il fascismo, che ha profuso tanti milioni in spettacoli variamente giudicabili, non s'è mai deciso a spenderne uno solo per un teatro d'arte[.]"[12] In the very first years after the March on Rome, Mussolini solicited and reviewed numerous proposals for a National prose theatre and by 1927 had already funded four different Art houses. Later, when the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (GUF) formed student theatre groups, its flagship was the Teatro Sperimentale in Florence, where a new generation would research, experiment, and write in an attempt to create the Italian theatre of tomorrow. We've seen, too, how the duce's relationship support for such experimental houses as the Teatro delle Arti endured. Governmental prizes for prose companies increased throughout the *ventennio,* and directives in the final years made sure that funds went to those whose artistic standards were the highest. One wonders if the Capo del governo was known to have a soft spot for thespians, given Theatre Inspector Nicola De

[11] The radio also saw more consistent support than the cinema did. It, too, provided education and entertainment but became more of a governing tool than did either film or theatre. The television, though later, received attention as well; we can imagine that support of it would've continued in the same fashion, given more time. See Gaborik, *Lo spettacolo del fascismo*, cit.
[12] d'Amico, *Il teatro non deve morire*, cit., p. 78.

Pirro's complaint that the *capocomici* might "ricorrere alla persona del duce, com'è loro costume" to ask for continued backing in the face of these increasingly selective standards.[13]

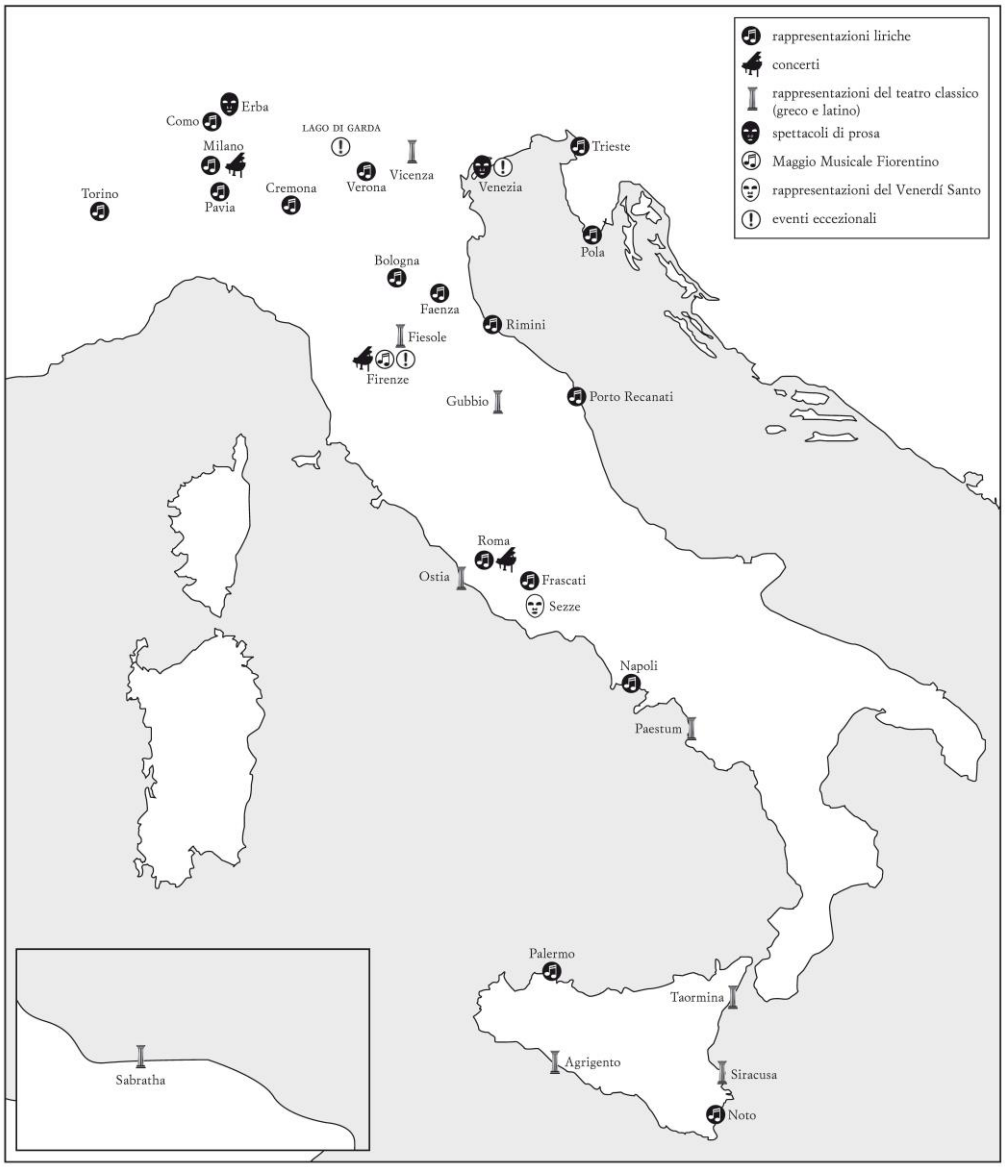
Yet, it is true that from the late twenties onward Mussolini and his hierarchs turned a large part of their attention away from the Art and the bourgeious theatres towards open-air spectacles for massive crowds. They created or helped sustain artistic education and training, single performances and entire festivals, and new (or refurbished ancient) venues to house them. There was room for everything, outdoor and in: opera; ancient, classic, and contemporary plays; musical and dance concerts; and *rappresentazioni sacre*. The first comprehensive efforts included the foundation of two National Institutes. After seeing impressive productions of *I sette a Tebe* and *Antigone* in the Greek theatre of Siracusa in 1924, Mussolini turned their organizing committee into the INDA, Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico (on August 7, 1925), charged with producing more such events not only in Siracusa but in ancient theatres and archeological zones all over the country. Then in late 1926 the duce subsidized the Istituto Nazionale per la rappresentazione di drammi di Gabriele d'Annunzio. Over the next decade a vast performance network would spread across the peninsula and islands, coming to represent the fascists' considerable effort to "*andare al popolo.*" See **Map 3**, on the following page.

Despite later dismissal of these projects, many of them were artistically noteworthy, for they showcased existing talents, re-envisioned classic texts, experimented with new aesthetics and technical capabilities, and hosted foreign works and artists. There were countless impressive performances, from Venice, where a 1933 *Otello* at the Palazzo Ducale inspired Biennale Segretario generale Antonio Maraini to create the Biennale of Theatre; to Erba (1932, the centenary of Goethe's death, saw a premiere of the Mussolini's adored *Faust*); to the INDA's performances in Siracusa, Taormina and other cities' ancient theatres,

[13] Cit. in Pedullà, *Il teatro italiano*, cit., p. 145. For overviews of prose theatre subventions, see both Pedullà and Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale*, cit.

where the anti-archeological, wholly modern stage designs by Duilio Cambellotti, modern dances by the students of Hellerau-Laxenburg Eurythmics school, and careful attention to the new art of directing impressed spectators one performance after another. Italy's best actors from Emma Gramatica to Raffaele Viviani and stage designer-architects like Marchi were frequently hired.[14]

Map 3. Theatre and music *all'aperto*, excluding OND productions, mid-April to late-August. Exceptional events included here are the 1934 production of *18BL* (Florence) and two major productions of D'Annunzio's plays: *La figlia di Jorio* at his Lake Garda villa (1927) and *La nave* (Venice, 1938).



[14] See *Artista di Dioniso. Duilio Cambellotti e il teatro greco di Siracusa 1914-1948*, ed. Monica Centanni, Electa, Milano 2004. The INDA archives in Siracusa are a treasure trove for further research into these activities. Among their resources are a complete collection of the Institute's journal *Dioniso*, where attention to purely theatrical concerns – like the showcasing of the new art of *regia* – was anything but secondary.

Finally, some of Europe's most legendary theatrical figures, including Jacques Copeau and Max Reinhardt (a Jew who had made his mark in Berlin and Vienna but would leave his native Austria after the Anschluss) were called in to mount productions for one of the most important of the epoch's festivals, the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, which from 1933 produced concerts, operas, and also prose plays; on Mussolini's orders, this biannual gala became yearly in 1937.[15] It was also at the Maggio Musicale that *I giganti della montagna* – the work most cited as supposed proof of Pirandello's anti-fascism – premiered posthumously in 1937, as did Bontempelli's anti-magic *Cenerentola* in 1942.

Contrary to common assumption, propaganda plays comprised a relatively small part of the regime's repertoire. (Even the *filodrammatiche*, who sometimes produced texts written by amateurs, by far the most prolific writers of fascist plays, presented a relatively small number of them.) While Mussolini did ask his writers, as in his 1933 speech to the SIAE, to be "interpreti del nostro tempo, che è quello della rivoluzione fascista," he did not ask them to write propaganda and in fact held a policy favoring creative autonomy. In large part, the regime's attitude toward the theatre corresponded with this statement; fascist theatre-making signaled an interest in the form not simply as a political tool to be exploited or industry to be strengthened, but also as art and entertainment to be nurtured. This is not to say, of course, that there was no element of political pragmatism, nor disturbing examples of propaganda creation like those launched by Pavolini and carried out by Bragaglia in the late thirties; these have been amply discussed. The question is really another: sometimes the regime produced good theatre. It was not antithetical to political utility; and political utility, when it came to the stage, was achieved in many complex ways – and rarely through explicit propaganda.

[15] For Mussolini's and Alessandro Pavolini's roles in the creation of the Maggio Musicale, see Tinterri, "‹‹L'Alba Apparì›› (Firenze 1933)," cit.

Victoria De Grazia has described the Dopolavoro's "deceptively apolitical" leisure-time organization as a powerful weapon in obtaining consensus.[16] This perspective is useful not just for OND activities but for most of fascist theatrical performance. Before turning specifically to the Dopolavoro's many initiatives, though, it is worth pausing to look in this light at one particular question: the dialect theatre. General studies of fascism tend to highlight what has been identified as a war on dialect culture, perceived as an impediment to the nationalization of the masses in a logic where "una nazione = una lingua."[17] The campaign for national and linguistic unity sought first to promote standard Italian, making instruction in the language obligatory already with Giovanni Gentile's education reform of 1923. Interventions of the later years are described by historians as more aggressive, though: what could perhaps have been seen as that promotion or a "defense" of Italian increasingly became an offensive against all that was not, so that, for instance, educational programming including Italian lessons on the radio was accompanied by "una politica antidialettale che tentò di espungere dall'uso quotidiano, e soprattutto dalla produzione artistica, in particolare dal teatro popolare, le parlate regionali."[18]

And yet, in reality the treatment of dialect – and of practitioners and patrons of dialect theatre – was far more nuanced than such observations would lead us to believe. On this topic, the work of theatre historians could prove extremely beneficial to historians (and it is unfortunate that more attention hasn't been paid to the work of specialists in this area). There are some well-known instances of repression of dialect theatre, and sscholars have been quick to examine them; but theatre historians have demonstrated that to speak of a war against dialect in relation to theatre is too extreme.[19] As is true for so many other issues that have

[16] Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent. Mass Organization of leisure in Fascist Italy.* Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1981.
[17] Dogliani, *Il fascismo,* cit., p. 259.
[18] *Ivi*, p. 261.
[19] For two brief case studies, see in *Ariel* 2-3 (1993), an issue on theatre and fascism, Sergio Raffaelli, "Mussolini contro il teatro dialettale romangnolo," pp. 139-45, and Mariateresa Zoppello, "Teatro Veneto e

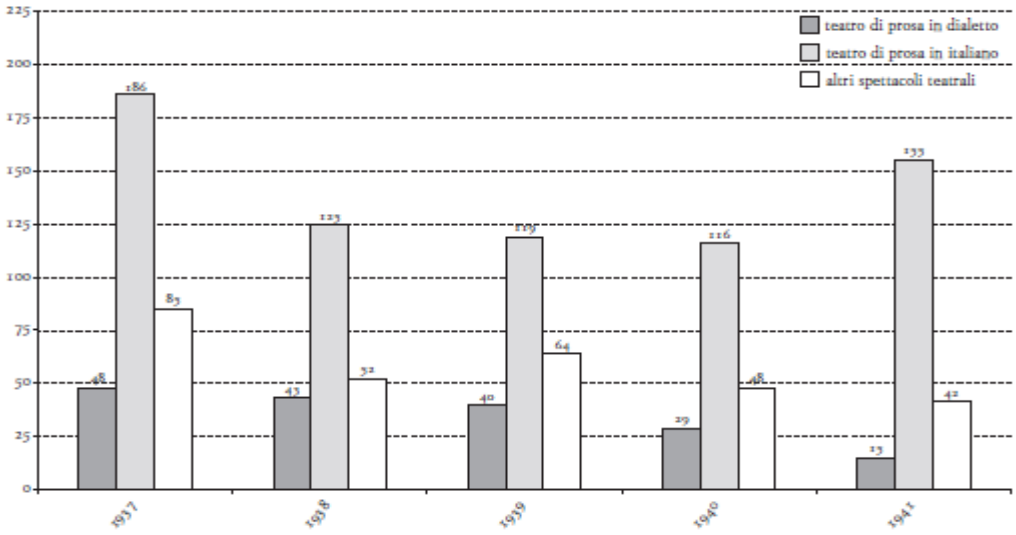
been discussed in this study, dispositions regarding the dialect theatre changed with time and circumstance; there were exceptions to every custom and rule. The management of dialect performance was in fact so varied that Antonella Ottai has been prompted to speak of "schizophrenia" here, too, particularly in reference to the war years.[20]

Let's first turn to the numbers, which already qualify the claims about expungement referred to above. In 1937, the OND produced 3.5% of all dialect theatre (and sold 1.8% of tickets to dialect shows). In other words, the PNF's largest performance sponsor, the OND, made a miniscule contribution to dialect theatre. Given all we are told of the regime's campaign against dialect culture, this number would only seem surprising in that the regime sponsored *any* dialect performance at all. However, details revealed in **Table 8**, regarding dialect theatre in the *Sabati teatrali* program, are more unexpected. The *Sabati teatrali* made shows in elite theatres (like the Teatro Argentina in Roma and La Scala Opera House in Milan) affordable to the working class; Saturday matinees were reserved for OND members at very reduced prices. Hailed as a response to Mussolini's call for a theatre of the masses, the program (begun in 1936) boasted 198, 970 spectators in the first few months of the 1937 season. The opening performances in Rome, including Aldo De Benedetti's *Due dozzine di rose scarlatte* at the Teatro Argentina (which, as we see in **Table 9** below, the duce attended), were able to accommodate 6000 *dopolavoristi* but reportedly had to send away 17,000 other requests, to be fulfilled at future performances.

censura fascista," pp. 195-206. For general statistics on dialect performance, see Società Italiana degli Editori ed Autori, *Lo Spettacolo in Italia*, cit.; Dino Alfieri, *La vita dello spettacolo in Italia nel decennio 1924-1933*, SIAE, Roma 1934.

[20] See Ottai, *Come a concerto. Il Teatro Umoristico nelle scene degli anni trenta*, Bulzoni, Roma 2002, a study of the De Felippo siblings' enterprise, which, for Ottai, demonstrated among other things "che il dialetto è una pratica della lingua e non affermazione di una cultura memore di antiche subalternità, storiche e politiche" (p. 37).

Table 8. *Sabati teatrali* dialect performances (1937-41).



As the table shows, the number of operas, considered a first-rate expression of Italian genius, was practically equal to that of dialect shows. In 1937, 15% of performances were of dialect plays. In five years of Sabato teatrale programming, we see an increase (to 19.5% in 1938), then a stable percentage (consistently between 15 and 19.5%), with respect to a drop to 7% in 1941. In this same year, though, the OND produced 2.4% of all dialect theatre performed, an increase over 1937, which is significant considering that 1941 brought a general decline in dialect performance.

In other words, while the regime offered the dialect theatre little support in terms of substantially contributing to the total number of performances, the dialect theatre did comprise a significant part of OND production. The numbers for the previous years in fact show that, of a total of 7511 prose performances put on by the OND's filodrammatiche in 1932, 1566, or 20.85%, were in dialect. In 1933 the percentage rose to 23.93%. What's more, in 1932, these 1566 OND shows constituted 9.4% of all dialect theatre produced. The total number of dialect performances by all companies increased to 38% of all the prose plays performed.

Table 9. Mussolini at the theatre, 1937. The events marked (CP) are reported in Claretta Petacci's diaries, which are published only in abridged form; it is therefore possible that these are just a portion of the performances attended by the duce that year.

9 gennaio	inaugurazione dei Sabati teatrali dell'Ond. Mussolini assiste allo spettacolo *Due dozzine di rose scarlatte* di Aldo De Benedetti al Teatro Argentina di Roma
23 gennaio	Mussolini va all'opera (CP)
23 febbraio	Mussolini va all'opera (CP)
25 febbraio	Mussolini va al Teatro Argentina (CP)
4 marzo	Mussolini va al Teatro Argentina (CP)
19 marzo	Mussolini assiste allo spettacolo *Edipo Re* nel teatro romano a Sabratha, in Libia
3 aprile	Mussolini va all'opera (CP)
10 aprile	Mussolini va all'opera (CP)
28 aprile	il duce inaugura Cinecittà e assiste alle prime riprese
5 maggio	Mussolini visita la nuova sede della Confederazione professionisti e artisti e il Teatro delle arti, fondazione il cui direttore era Anton Giulio Bragaglia, che ha sede in via Sicilia a Roma
24 luglio	Mussolini, con il direttore Giovacchino Forzano, visita gli stabilimenti Pisorno a Tirrenia per assistere agli esperimenti sul film a colori; in serata torna a Roma per il concerto sinfonico alla basilica di Massenzio. Paga personalmente il suo biglietto e va a sedersi tra il pubblico di ottomila persone invece che nel settore riservato alle autorità
4 agosto	a Roma, nella sala cinematografica del ministero della Cultura Popolare, il duce assiste alla prima proiezione del film *Scipione l'Africano*
25 settembre	arrivato in Germania, Mussolini viene accompagnato da Hitler al ricevimento presso la Casa dell'arte tedesca, dove sono presenti tutti grandi personaggi dello spettacolo germanico, tra cui la regista Leni Riefenstahl
8 dicembre	Mussolini assiste con donna Rachele e i figli maschi al *Trovatore* che apre la stagione del Teatro Reale dell'Opera di Roma
14 dicembre	Mussolini va all'opera (CP)

A stated goal of offering opportunities to participate in and attend amateur theatricals was the teaching of Italian, but it clearly behooved the regime to incorporate the popular dialect tradition in their repertoire of offerings. Nationalization would have to work not around but through local tradition and identity even as Italian was a means of unifying separate communities. This was true when it came to the regulation of the commercial theatre as well. If the regime could put restraints on vernacular performance, by refusing to give it attention in the press and often excluding dialect companies from subventions, it couldn't – Ottai has pointed out – "interdirla completamente senza fare i conti […] con la peculiarità di una tradizione 'italiana' che ha dalla sua un cospicuo numero di sostenitori illustri."[21] From this point of view, while the numbers are already important in contextualizing claims about the war on dialect, it is also true that the real question isn't whether there was or wasn't performance in the vernacular, but how the regime incorporated it into its fascistization and nationalization schemes when and where it was present. Sources indicate a broad range in the popularity of dialect theatre throughout the 1930s, and on this matter, too, there was lively debate. The rather significant presence of dialect plays in the national repertoire is a cogent aspect of the pragmatic, "deceptively apolitical" leisure-time organization De Grazia

[21] *Ivi,* p. 42.

describes, as on the surface the acceptance – or promotion – of vernacular performance by the regime would seem at least disconnected from and perhaps even counter to political exigencies. (But, again, any analysis that doesn't take into account the content of plays is incomplete.) Nonetheless, in this way, the regime's sponsoring of dialect plays, however minor, might serve as a particularly interesting piece of support for the notion of the theatre as Mussolini's "arma più sofisticata" – not simple entertainment with pro-fascist storylines nor a means to disseminate positively- inflected news, nor even a performance form that in and of itself toed the party line, but a chance to build "new Italians" through various activities that offered education, discipline, self-expression, and a sense of belonging to both a local and a vast national community, and even the pleasure of aesthetic beauty.

To return to regime sponsored performance more generally, the OND especially activated this mission, and it had several other strategies for reaching the *popolo*. The organization sponsored a series of open-air shows (**Map 4**), such as a 1936 production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in the Roman Forum, and contributed to others' productions, helping transport groups, for instance, to the INDA performances in far off places like Siracusa.[22] But their largest efforts were reserved for the ambulatory Carri di Tespi program and the cultivation of a new generation of theatre artists through education and competition. The Carri di Tespi were the PNF's most innovative and intensive effort. Party secretary Augusto Turati offered Forzano the oversight of the traveling theatre program that would literally deliver shows to urban and provincial masses who otherwise might have had rare opportunities to enjoy high quality culture and entertainment. Futurist architect Antonio Valente designed the prototype mobile theatre, a vast stage and even more oceanic platea that would be transported from town to town by truck brigades and assembled in a few hours' time in the piazzas, fields, or stadiums that had space for them. The results of its first tour in

[22] See Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, *Annuario dell'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, Istituto geografico DeAgostini, Novara 1937-1939; Mario Corsi, *Il teatro all'aperto in Italia*, Rizzoli, Milano 1939; Nicola De Pirro, *Il teatro per il popolo*, Novissima, Roma 1938.

1929 were so pleasing that the next year one opera and three prose brigades divided the Italian territory among themselves (in 1936, the number of prose trucks was reduced to two). For a decade, the Carri di Tespi were an OND centerpiece, consuming as much as 1/5 of its total budget, more than any other single activity, and, as the maps indicate, reaching all but two provincie in the first six years (for which we have complete data): Zara, in the far east, and Sondrio, in the far north.[23]

Map 4. OND Popular theatre, 1937. The ambulatory cinema symbols indicate the city from where the tours began.

The variation in the frequency of the visits and number of performances is notable, as is the breakdown by geographic area, in that we see a particular investment in the South and

[23] On the Carri di Tespi, see Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, *Annuario*, cit.; Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, *O.N.D. Carro di Tespi* (pamphlet), 1935; Paolo Orano, *I Carri di Tespi dell'O.N.D*, Pinciana, Roma 1937; De Grazia, *Culture of Consent* cit.; Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism*, cit.; On their repertory, see Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale*, cit.

on the islands. It would appear that the organization sought to appeal to local tastes and traditions, producing more prose theatre in the South and islands and larger numbers of operas in the Center and North; nearly 43% of prose performances were given in the South yet less than 18% of opera performances. Despite this imbalance, however, there were more Carri di Tespi performances held in the South (37.49%) than there were either in Central Italy (32.96%) or the North (29.56%). Though the OND struggled to have an important presence in the South, it expended tremendous efforts to take the theatre there, just as it opened numerous movie houses. See **Map 5.**

Map 5. The Carri di Tespi tours, 1937.

The propagandistic effect of these occasions – regardless of repertory, which was exclusively Italian and, when it came to the prose Carri, combined rather unsophisticated contemporary plays with classics like Alfieri and Goldoni and authors such as d'Annunzio, Pirandello, and the so-called *grotteschi* Pier Maria Rosso di San Secondo and Luigi Chiarelli – was undoubtedly impressive. "The medium was the true message," Jeffrey Schnapp has claimed.[24] The Carri's stages, outfitted with the most modern lighting equipment and stage effects, were astonishing displays of organization, technical wizardry, and sheer size. Giving an average of 190-200 shows per season to crowds numbering from 2000-5000, the Carri di Tespi brigades astonished nearly one million spectators. The medium was indeed a potent message, but from a point of view of the theatrical arts, this was also real progress. The stages of the Carri di Tespi offered the best there was to be had: revolving stage platforms, a Fortuny dome, complex lighting effects; in short, all of the spectacular capabilities that make the theatre theatrical (the technological upgrading which, Bragaglia insisted in his 1929 letter to the duce, would bring about the theatrical revolution the regime promised). It becomes especially difficult to dismiss all of this as just professionally competent but philosophically subpar spectacle, however, if we keep in mind that this sort of advancement made possible the full flourishing of the avant-garde director's theatre in post-war Italy. The continuity between the regime's support for the art theatres (like those of Bragaglia and of Pirandello) and the outdoor mass theatre projects is an important issue I can't adequately take up here, but, in brief, it's noteworthy that while some of the era's protagonists saw the two wholly at odds, regime hierarchs and artists like Bragaglia saw them as mutually beneficial.

Given the success of the regular prose and lyric trucks, in 1937 a Carri di Tespi di provincia enterprise was begun. These smaller trucks visited towns that were too little for the regular Carri performances. Fascist officials proudly claimed, "Il popolo ha sentito che

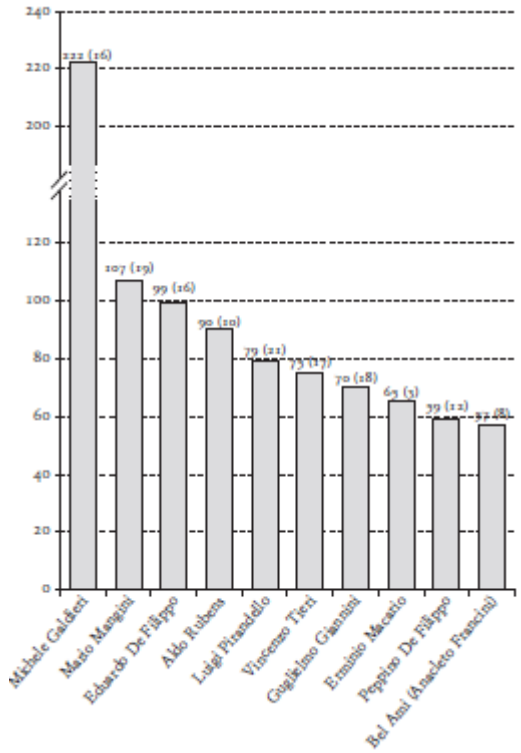
[24] Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism*, cit., p.21.

l'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro – l'istituzione creata dal Duce per il suo benessere fisico, morale, e spirituale – non ha dimenticato nessuno."[25] Most surprisingly, not even the Italians in Libya were forgotten; upon the request of Governor Italo Balbo, a tour with about 100 shows were organized there by and for the military. **Map 4,** above, notes the cities from which the provincial Carri departed in their first season, when they gave 351 performances for 175,000 spectators. As indicated, there was also a traveling cinema program, which supplemented the theatre in larger towns and replaced it in the very smallest ones. According to the OND officials, these weekly projections were propagandistic and educational, and in 1937 alone shown in 2175 rural locations.

The Carri di Tespi provinciali showcased the talents of the best *filodrammatiche* groups, of which the OND had organized 2066 by 1936; the competitions for amateur thespians accounted for 21% of the regime's cultural activity competitions; alongside the vast performance network implemented and the foundation of numerous small theatres, libraries, and acting schools it is impossible to discuss in detail here, the centrality of the theatre to the regime's consensus building becomes indisputable. All told, the picture starts to look like the nationalization of the Thespians. Though it became common after the war to attribute the survival of the theatre and other arts to the anti-fascism allowed to flourish in the very organizations (such as the GUF theatres) that produced the next generation of artists, today it seems more fruitful to acknowledge that alongside the kitsch, the propaganda, and the draconian laws that would inevitably appear "sotto il segno del Littorio," to quote a chapter from Zurlo's memoirs, there was real support on the part of Mussolini and his regime for the theatre, and not little to show for it. And not merely on the level of practical organization or financing.[26]

[25] Paolo Orano, *Il carro di Tespi*, cit., p. 63.
[26] Zurlo, *Memorie*, cit., p.15.

It should be said, though, that the frustrations of someone like Silvio d'Amico are more than understandable. For years he, like Pirandello, had been most invested in the creation of a State-sponsored Prose house and thus – despite the lip service even they paid to the *popolo* – could not have appreciated the regime's shift in strategy, which included but by no means centered on authors of the caliber of a Bontempelli or Pirandello, or even of Eduardo, as indicated by **Table 10**, here, a ranking of the ten most-represented authors, which refers to performances in Rome between 1932 and 1940.[27]



D'Amico concluded (in a 1942 article reprinted in *Il teatro non deve morire*), "Noi abbiamo ormai come chi dicesse i cavalli, le briglie, i finimenti, la frusta, e fors'anche il cocchiere: ma non abbiamo la carrozza. Motivo per cui continuiamo ad andare a piedi."[28] For d'Amico, that carriage was a fancy theatre in Rome, with perhaps two others in Milan or Turin, with the corresponding high-brow repertoire. For the fascist hierarchs, however, the carrozza was actually mobile, and multiple. Their National Theatre was not the single

[27] This data comes from Antonella Ottai, *Come a Concerto,* cit., appendix, p. 341.
[28] d'Amico, *Il teatro non deve morire*, cit., p. 177.

impressive edifice in Rome, but rather a vast web of indoor theatres, outdoor theatres, and temporary stages placed in as many gardens, archeological sites, and *piazze* as they could find.

D'Amico's grievances attest more than anything to the breach between his and the regime's conception of the theatre's place in a society of the masses. He was right about one thing that troubled him greatly: the Italy of the 1930s did not produce an important body of dramatic literature. However, this was hardly unique to Italy. Nor was it a sign of the theatre's demise, but rather of the beginning of a new phase, not only in Italy but across Europe. D'Amico still reasoned as if the theatre were text to be performed, the fascists as if it were experience to be had. In this they were more in tune with developments in theatrical culture than he was – for better and worse. It is probably for this reason that when international greats such as Edward Gordon Craig, Maurice Maeterlinck, Aleksandr Tairov, to name a few, attended the 1934 Volta Conference, many expressed enthusiasm for the recent developments. For all the complaints there were to be had, in any case there was a clear sense of a changing tide, that a new sort of theatre, for a new sort of public, would be born. The Capo del governo and Silvio d'Amico were agreed that the real crisis of the theatre was its lack of "rapporto con la vita spirituale del paese," and that, as Mussolini had said in the aforementioned SIAE speech, the drama of the new epoch would need to "agitare le grandi passioni collettive."[29] But how to agree on what those passions were? This was a problem that wouldn't be solved.

When it came to theatre practice of the *ventennio*, there is no doubt, "C'era Mussolini." In his essay for the *Critica fascista* artistic debates, the same Bontempelli had argued that it would be up to future historians to determine if the traces of fascism would be

[29] d'Amico, *Il teatro non deve morire,* cit., p. 14.

left upon art of the period.[30] We are perhaps still a long way away from finding a satisfying answer to the question, but I hope that by keeping Mussolini at the center of the investigation, we may have a promising path to understanding the regime's legacy on the theatre, and also through the theatre see in new ways something about the duce, and fascism itself.

[30] Bontempelli, "Arte fascista," cit.

Table 4.

Per una cronologia dello spettacolo tecnologico fascista

anno	cinema	radio	televisione
1922		nasce a Roma Radio Araldo, prima stazione radiofonica italiana	
1923		dopo diversi tentativi con il governo liberale e con il nuovo governo fascista nel 1922, Marconi scrive personalmente a Mussolini, chiedendo aiuto per il settore della radio e facendogli presente l'utilità propagandistica che potrebbe avere	
1924		6 ottobre: l'Unione Radiofonica Italiana (è una società privata, primo ente nazionale, formato da diverse società) e Gugliemo Marconi cominciano a diffondere dalla stazione di Roma programmi radiofonici	
1925	5 novembre: il Sindacato istruzione cinematografica (società anonima di Luciano De Feo), appoggiato da Mussolini, si trasforma nell'Istituto nazionale Luce (Unione Cinematografica Educativa), diventando organo dello stato	4 novembre: Mussolini parla alla radio per la prima volta, dal Teatro Costanzi di Roma	
1926	Stefano Pittaluga fonda la Sasp (Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga), che assorbe l'Uci (Unione Cinematografica Italiana) una legge stabilisce la proiezione obbligatoria dei film Luce in tutti i cinema italiani	Mussolini crea una commissione per studiare la possibilità di diffondere trasmissioni radio a livello nazionale 10 ottobre: il discorso di Mussolini sulla Battaglia del grano viene trasmesso in tutte le parti del paese raggiunte dalla radio	25 ottobre: Alessando Banfi, ingegnere, fa una dimostrazione pratica di televisione presso l'Associazione Elettronica Italiana a Milano
1927	16 giugno: una legge stabilisce che almeno la decima parte delle giornate di spettacolo sia riservata a proiezioni di pellicole italiane giugno: inizia la produzione del «Giornale Cinematografico Luce»	La Uri viene trasformata in Eiar, ente speciale a capitale privato, con l'appoggio di Costanzo Ciano, ministro delle Comunicazioni. Il cambiamento viene ufficializzato l'anno successivo; le sedi sono fissate a Roma (legale e amministrativa) e a Torino (direzione generale)	
1929	viene costituito l'Enac (Ente Nazionale per la Cinematografia), istituzione semiprivata finanziata dallo stato che si occupa della distribuzione e dei rapporti con produttori stranieri. Fallisce già nell'anno successivo	febbraio: F. T. Marinetti declama alla radio il suo *Bombardamento di Adrianopoli* il governo richiede la diffusione delle notizie con il «Giornale radio»	28 febbraio: primi esperimenti di trasmissioni delle immagini a Torino, poi a Milano e a Roma; a Milano, Alessandro Banfi e Sergio Bertolotti aprono un laboratorio televisivo dell'Uri
1930	maggio: a Roma, inaugurazione degli stabilimenti Cines-Pittaluga; il primo film realizzato è *La canzone dell'amore*, soggetto di Pirandello tratto da una sua novella	le stazioni di Milano e di Roma diffondono programmi per i giovani e i bambini; il «Giornale del fanciullo» trasmette storie su Mussolini e altri eroi italiani accanto a esercizi religiosi, canzoni, poesie, ecc. A partire da fine anno, diffusione di informazioni agricole per i contadini	nasce il Laboratorio Ricerche dell'Eiar a Torino che fa esperimenti televisivi
1931	legge 918 del 18 giugno, intesa a rilanciare l'industria cinematografica. È considerata uno spartiacque nella politica cinematografica del regime	il Comitato di vigilanza sulla radio suggerisce la distribuzione di apparecchi radio nelle scuole e nelle sedi di dopolavoro	11 luglio: il governo assicura all'Eiar la concessione senza esclusiva per la radiotelegrafia e la radiovisione circolare, mentre la concessione rimane in esclusiva per le radiocomunicazioni circolari
1932	Inaugurata dagli enti locali la prima Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica di Venezia, presieduta dal conte Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata 2 aprile: dopo la morte di Pittaluga, il letterato Emilio Cecchi, appena tornato da un lungo viaggio americano che lo ha portato anche a Hollywood, diventa direttore artistico della Cines	superata la maggior parte dei conflitti con la Chiesa, Mussolini autorizza la trasmissione di programmi a carattere religioso	26 ottobre: il duce visita gli impianti televisivi dell'Eiar al Palazzo dell'elettricità a Torino; si fa inquadrare dalla telecamera. I dirigenti promettono che entro 10 anni la tv sarà accessibile a tutti

anno	cinema	radio	televisione
1933	5 ottobre: il decreto legge 1414 modifica ed espande la legge 918 del 1931; favorisce i produttori nazionali, prevedendo per esempio la proiezione di un film italiano ogni tre film stranieri, e l'obbligo del doppiaggio per i film stranieri vengono create le sezioni cinematografiche dei Guf, Gruppi universitari fascisti La Cines produce *Acciaio*, su soggetto di Pirandello e con la regia del tedesco Walter Ruttmann. Il film si propone di esaltare la potenza di lavoro fascista alle acciaierie di Terni	creato il Centro sperimentale di radiofonia Marconi ottobre: lancio del programma *Cronache del regime*, considerato «il primo esempio significativo di propaganda di integrazione fascista alla radio»	28 settembre - 8 ottobre: alla V Mostra nazionale della Radio a Milano, Banfi presenta i primi esperimenti di televisione italiana, in diretta e anche con pellicola. A mostra finita, l'impianto va a Torino, dove entra in funzione la prima trasmittente televisiva italiana a onde ultracorte
1934	La Cines produce *1860*, con regia di Alessando Blasetti 18 settembre: creazione della Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia, nell'ambito del sottosegretariato di stato della Stampa e Propaganda. È un punto di partenza per una vera politica cinematografica; Luigi Freddi è nominato direttore l'accordo Ciano-Hays prevede l'importazione di 250 film americani	novembre: Marinetti inizia una serie di conversazioni radiofoniche all'Eiar, che durano fino a gennaio 1935; diventerà una presenza importante alla radio	
1935	giugno: in base a un apposito decreto legge, si cominciano a praticare anticipazioni finanziarie all'industria cinematografica aprile: nasce il Centro sperimentale di cinematografia (Csc), ente autonomo fondato dal ministero e sottoposto alla direzione di Luigi Freddi, il quale chiama a dirigerlo il letterato Luigi Chiarini. I corsi iniziano il 1° ottobre 9 novembre: viene creato l'Enic (con capitale privato, ma sotto la direzione di Freddi), che si occupa di produzione, distribuzione, e gestione di sale. Le 29 sale iniziali saranno 97 nel 1941	il controllo della radio passa al ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda; i programmi sulla salute e sullo sport diventano sempre piú frequenti e numerosi ottobre: il ministero della Cultura Popolare dà istruzioni ai prefetti di vietare l'ascolto di programmi stranieri sugli apparecchi pubblici; di fronte alla difficoltà dell'impresa, il governo cerca di combattere questi programmi con la sua propaganda	Presso l'Ice, Istituto per la cinematografia educativa, viene creato il Centro internazionale di televisione, con un comitato per lo sviluppo della televisione. Il presidente è l'accademico d'Italia Orso Mario Corbino
1936		il «Giornale radio» e le altre notizie vanno elaborati sotto la supervisione del ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda per incoraggiare l'interesse degli ascoltatori verso il teatro radiofonico, si concedono limitate autorizzazioni a trasmissioni in dialetto	
1937	28 aprile: a Roma viene inaugurata Cinecittà, che appartiene alla azienda privata Società Anonima Italiana Stabilimenti Cinematografici, di Carlo Roncoroni, con finanziamento statale di 4 milioni di lire 29 giugno: agli stabilimenti di Pisorno, Giovacchino Forzano mostra ai dirigenti i primi esperimenti riusciti di film a colori girato a Cinecittà e a Sabaudia, esce *Scipione l'Africano*, regia di Carmine Gallone	Sotto Starace, il governo lancia un progetto per creare interesse verso la radio nelle campagne; apparecchi vengono collocati nei municipi e nei centri di riunione dei contadini aprile: lanciata la «radio balilla»; sulla vendita degli apparecchi si pratica il prezzo politico di 430 lire giugno: Mussolini vieta gli annunci commerciali alla radio, diffusi a partire dal 1926 comincia una nuova trasmissione del sabato	aprile: il governo crea l'Ispettorato per la radiodiffusione e la televisione Roma, 2 dicembre: entra in funzione il primo trasmettitore della stazione Monte Mario. La stampa tiene riservata la notizia

anno	cinema	radio	televisione
		sera: *I dieci minuti del Lavoratore*, programma esplicitamente propagandistico	
1938	la Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica di Venezia passa sotto il controllo del regime	gennaio: Mussolini ordina di limitare la trasmissione di musica di compositori ebrei; a novembre cominciano i programmi antiebraici 24 gennaio: cominciano lezioni di lingua tedesca e una settimana piú tardi di lingua amarica; a marzo iniziano trasmissioni per «lo studio e la difesa dell'italianità della lingua»	l'Eiar annuncia che nei primi mesi del '39 inizierà un servizio regolare di televisione a Roma e a Milano 31 ottobre: Mussolini inaugura a Roma il centro trasmittente a onde corte di Prato Smeraldo, tra i piú grandi dell'Europa
1939	9 aprile: entra in vigore il monopolio statale per l'acquisto di film esteri, affidato all'Enic; quattro delle majors americane (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 20th Century-Fox, Paramount, Warner Bros.) abbandonano praticamente il mercato italiano ottobre: Cinecittà diventa proprietà dello stato	aprile: un accordo tra il governo e il Vaticano prevede la replica delle trasmissioni vaticane da parte dell'Eiar, senza che siano sottoposte alla censura	22 luglio: inaugurazione dei programmi sperimentali dell'Eiar dallo studio di Roma; si realizzano trasmissioni per il pubblico visibili presso un padiglione del Circo Massimo e in negozi di via Nazionale e di via del Corso 30 ottobre: nel salotto di Villa Torlonia, con la famiglia e alcuni gerarchi, Mussolini assiste a una trasmissione dell'Eiar
1940	come stabilito dalla «legge Alfieri» del 16 giugno 1938, i produttori privati cessano di ricevere fondi pubblici per la produzione; riceveranno invece premi a seconda degli incassi realizzata la nuova sede del Csc in via Tuscolana. L'architetto, Antonio Valente, è un futurista, ed è la stessa persona che si occupava del disegno dei Carri di Tespi per l'Ond	23 giugno: dopo l'entrata dell'Italia in guerra, le stazioni radiofoniche diffondono programmi unificati	31 maggio: fine delle trasmissioni sperimentali della tv Eiar per timore di interferenze con i sistemi degli aeroporti di Roma e di Milano
1941	rinascita della Cines come società pubblica; lo stato entra nel settore della produzione, ma il direttore Freddi non riuscirà mai a convincere Mussolini a nazionalizzare il cinema italiano Il Csc diventa ente pubblico Roberto Rossellini esordisce con il primo film di una trilogia di pellicole di guerra: *La nave bianca*. Seguono *Un pilota ritorna* e, nel 1942, *L'uomo dalla croce*	gennaio: Ezra Pound comincia trasmissioni di propaganda in lingua inglese contro gli Alleati per Radio Roma (dieci puntate di sette minuti ciascuna fino al luglio 1943) febbraio: per la trasmissione diretta delle notizie in altri paesi, Mussolini crea l'Agenzia Radio Urbe settembre: Marinetti diventa consulente per il teatro e per i programmi parlati dell'Eiar; il ministro della Cultura Popolare Alessandro Pavolini gli concede 10 minuti al mese per la rubrica «Futurismo mondiale» e per la lettura di liriche guerresche	
1942	aprile: la Camera internazionale del film, creata nel 1941 dal ministro della Propaganda nazista Goebbels, tiene la sua riunione a Roma	maggio: il Minculpop promuove un repertorio di canzoni piú ampio, dopo un rapporto che rivela noia da parte del popolo per l'eccessiva ripetitività dei canti patriottici novembre-dicembre: bombardate le sedi Eiar a Genova e a Torino; il personale viene trasferito in Toscana, a Venezia e in altre città	
1943		nuovi bombardimenti sull'Eiar a Torino. Gli impiegati vengono militarizzati il 20 luglio; i dirigenti prevedono la distruzione dell'impianto in caso di occupazione da parte del nemico	

Bibliography

Principal periodicals of the epoch cited (individual articles are reported in footnotes)

900
Comoedia
Critica Fascista
Cronache d'attualità
Film
Gerarchia
Giornale d'Italia
Giornale di Sicilia
Il Dramma
Il Popolo d'Italia
Il Selvaggio
L'Italia Letteraria
La Nuova Antologia
New Masses
New York Times
Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine
Quadrivio
Scenario
Tempo

Primary and Literary Sources, Testimonies, and Other Period Publications

Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers,* in *Aeschylus I*, ed. David Grene and Richard Lattimore. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1953.

Alessi, Rino. *Il giovane Mussolini rievocato da un suo compagno di scuola.* Milano: Edizioni del borghese, 1969.

Alfieri, Dino. *Deus dictateurs face à face. Rome-Berlin 1939-1943.* Paris: Bibliotheque du cheval ailé, 1948.
--- *La vita dello spettacolo in Italia nel decennio 1924-1933*. Roma: SIAE, 1934.

Alvaro, Corrado. *Cronache e scritti teatrali*, ed. Alfredo Barbina. Roma: Edizioni Abete, 1976.
--- preface to Pirandello, *Novelle per un anno*, ed. Manlio LoVecchio-Musti. Milano: Mondadori, 1956.
--- Nino Frank, and Massimo Bontempelli. *Lettere a "900,"* ed. Marinella Mascia Galateria, Roma: Bulzoni, 1985.

Aniante, Antonio. *Mussolini.* Paris: Grassnet, s.d.

Antongini, Tom. *D'Annunzio Aneddotico*. Milano: Mondadori, 1939.
--- *Vita segreta di Gabriele D'Annunzio.* Milano: Mondaadori, 1941.

Bedeschi, Sante and Rino Alessi. *Anni Giovanili di Mussolini.* Milano: Mondadori, 1939.

Benelli, Sem. *Schiavitù.* Milano: Mondadori, 1945.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations. Walter Benjamin Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968 (1936).

Berneri, Camillo. *Mussolini, Psicologia di un dittatore*, ed. Pier Carlo Masini. Milano: Edizioni Azione Comune, 1966 (1934).

Berti, S. *La declamazione e la drammatica secondo la scuola della natura*. Firenze: Tipografica di Carlo Rebagli, 1849.

Bontempelli, Massimo. *Il neosofista e altri scritti.* Milano: Mondadori, 1928.
--- *L'avventura Novecentista*. *Selva Polemica (1926-1938)*. Firenze: Vallecchi, 1938.
--- *Teatro.* Milano: Mondadori, 1947.

Bottai, Giuseppe. *Diario 1935-1944*, ed. Giordano Bruno Guerri. Milano: BUR, 1982.

Bragaglia, Anton Giulio. *Il teatro della rivoluzione*. Roma: Edizione Tiber, 1929.
-- *Il teatro teatrale ossia il teatro.* Roma: Edizione Tiber, 1929.
--- "Lo spettacolo per masse." *La vita italiana.* July 1934.
---"Sempre 'anni difficili' per il teatro di Vitaliano Brancati." *Sipario* 10.103 (November 1954). Reprinted in issue *Vitaliano Brancati*, "L'Illuminista" 10. 28-29 (2010): 389-90.

Brancati, Vitaliano. *Diario Romano*, in *Racconti, teatro, scritti giornalistici*, ed. Marco Dondero. Milano: Mondadori, 2003, 1261-1618.
--- *Don Giovanni involontario*, in *Racconti, teatro, scritti giornalistici*, ed. Marco Dondero. Milano: Mondadori, 2003, 909-984.
--- *La Governante*, in *Racconti, teatro, scritti giornalistici*, ed. Marco Dondero. Milano: Mondadori, 2003, 1185-1258.
--- *Ritorno alla censura*, in *Romanzi e saggi*, ed. Marco Dondero, Milano: Mondadori, 2003, 1499-1568.

Brecht, Bertolt. "The Description of a New Technique of Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.

Cavaciocchi, Giuseppe. *Mussolini. sintesi critiche.* Bologna: Cappelli Editore, 1933.

Chesterton, G.K. *George Bernard Shaw.* Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2008 (1909).

Ciano, Galeazzo. *Diario 1937-1943,* ed. Renzo de Felice. Milano: BUR, 2000.

Corsi, Mario. *Il teatro all'aperto in Italia*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1939.

D'Amico, Silvio. *Cronache 1914/1955*, 5 Volls, ed. Alessandro d'Amico and Lina Vito. Palermo: Novecento, 2001.

--- *Il teatro non deve morire*. Roma: Eden, 1945.
--- *Storia del teatro drammatico.* Vol. II, abridged version, Roma: Bulzoni, 1960.

D'Annunzio, Gabriele. *Il fuoco*, ed. Anco Marzio Mutterle. Milano: Mondadori, 1990.
--- *La fiaccola sotto il moggio,* in *Tragedie, Sogni e misteri* Vol. I. Milano: Mondadori, 1945 (1939), 935-1064.
--- *La Gloria*, in *Tragedie, Sogni e misteri* Vol. I. Milano: Mondadori, 1945 (1939), 341-462.
--- *Scritti giornalistici* II, ed. Annamaria Andreoli and G. Zanetti. Milano: Mondadori, 2003.
--- *Scritti politici di Gabriele D'Annunzio*, ed. Paolo Alatri. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1980.

Daneo, Gian Carlo. *Benito Mussolini oratore. Discorso dell'On. Avv. Gian Carlo Daneo detto in Milano XXVI Maggio MCMXXVI all'istituto fascista di cultura.* Genova: Marsano, 1932.

De Ambris, Alceste. "Mussolini. La leggenda e l'uomo," in *Benito Mussolini. Quattro Testimonianze*, ed. Renzo de Felice. Firenze: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1976.

De Begnac, Yvon. *Taccuini Mussoliniani*, ed. Francesco Perfetti. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990.

De Pirro, Nicola. *Il teatro per il popolo*. Roma: Novissima, 1938.

Delcroix, Carlo. *D'Annunzio e Mussolini.* Firenze: Le Lettere, 2010.

Domino, Ignazio. *Mussolini oratore.* Firenze: All'insegna del libro, 1929.

Fagiolini, Walter. *Dizione e recitazione*. Udine: Tipografia arti grafiche friulane, 1959.

Forzano, Giovacchino. *Come li ho conosciuti*. Torino: Edizione Radio Italiana, 1957.

Freddi, Luigi. *Bandiere Nere.* Roma: Libereria del Littorio, s.d. (but 1929).
--- *Pattuglie.* Roma: Editrice "Antieuropa," s.d. (but 1930).

Ghirlanda, Giovanni. *Cenni sopra l'arte drammatica*. Firenze: Tipografia Mariani, 1896.

Ghislanzoni, Alberto. *Teatro e fascismo.* Mantova: Mussolinia Edizione Paladino, 1929.

Gianeri, Enrico. *Il Cesare di cartapesta. Mussolini nella caricatura*. Torino: Vega, 1945.

Gobetti, Piero. *Opere Complete.* Vol. III, *Scritti di critica teatrale*. Torino: Einaudi, 1974.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust* I, ed. and transl. Charles T. Brooks. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1856.

Gori, Fernando. *Mussolini Poeta.* Roma: Edizioni Pattuglia Nera, 1933.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Cronache teatrali 1915-1920*. Torino: Aragno, 2010.

ISTAT, *Annuario Statistico Italiano*. Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1922-1945.

Kirkpatrick, Ivone. *Mussolini. A Study in Power.* New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964.

La Rosa, Mario. *Mussolini sconosciuto*. Roma: ADI, 1991.

Le Bon, Gustave. *Psicologia delle folle.* Milano: Longanesi & C., 1970.

Ludwig, Emil. *Colloqui con Mussolini*. Milano: Mondadori, 2000 (1932).

Lussu, Emilio. *Marcia su Roma e dintorni. Fascismo visto da vicino.* Paris: Casa Editrice Critica, 1933.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Il Principe*, ed. Giorgio Inglesi. Torino: Einaudi, 1995.

Marinetti, F.T. *Taccuini 1915/1921*, ed. Alberto Bertoni, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987.

Masino, Paola. *Io, Massimo e gli altri*. Milano: Rusconi, 1995.

Megaro, Guadens. *Mussolini in the Making.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938.

Monaldi, Fernanda (Marchesa) e Carlo Capocci. *Verso l'avvenire! Quattro tempi.* Roma: Arte della Stampa, 1936.

Monaro, J Tragella. *Sem Benelli: l'uomo e il poeta.* Milano: La Prora, 1953.

Mussolini, Benito. *A Clara. Tutte le lettere a Clara Petacci 1943-1945*, ed. Luisa Montevecchi. Milano: Mondadori, 2011.
--- *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini 1919/1938*, ed. Renzo De Felice and Emilio Mariano. Milano: Mondadori, 1971.
--- *La Mia Vita*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1983.
---*Opera Omnia*, ed. E. and D. Susmel, 35volls. Firenze: La Fenice, 1951-63.
-- *Storia di un anno. Il tempo del bastone e della carota.* Milano: Mondadori, 1945 (1944).
--- and Giovacchino Forzano. *Mussolini autore drammatico, con facsimili di autografi inediti*. Firenze: G. Barbèra, 1954.

Mussolini, Rachele and Albert Zarca. *Mussolini. An Intimate Biography by his Widow.* New York: William Morrow & Co, 1974.
-- *The Real Mussolini*. New York: Saxon House, 1973.

Mussolini, Vittorio. *Mussolini e gli uomini nel suo tempo*. Roma: Ciarrapico, 1977.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. New York: Macmillan, 2011 (1885).

Ninchi, Annibale. *Annibale Ninchi racconta.* Torino: Nazzari & Ninchi, 1946.

Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro. *Annuario dell'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*. Novara: Istituto Geografico DeAgostini, 1937-1939.
--- *Carro di Tespi* (pamphlet). Roma: OND, 1935.

Orano, Paolo. *I Carri di Tespi dell'O.N.D.* Roma: Casa Editrice Pinciana, 1937.
--- *Mussolini da vicino.* Roma: Casa Editrice Pinciana, 1928.

Pandolfi, V. *Lo spettacolo del secolo*. Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1953.

Paratore, Ettore. *Nuovi studi dannunziani*. Pescara: Ediars, 1991.

Patch, Blanche. *Thirty Years With G.B.S.* New York: Dodd, Mead and Co, 1951.

Petacci, Claretta. *Mussolini segreto. Diari 1932-1938*, ed. Maura Suttora. Milano: Rizzoli, 2009.

Pini, Giorgio. *Benito Mussolini*. Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1939.
--- and Duilio Susmel, *Mussolini. L'Uomo e L'opera*. 4 Voll. Firenze: La Fenice, 1953.

Pirandello, Luigi. *I giganti della montagna*, in *Maschere nude*, ed. Italo Borzi and Maria Argenziano. Roma: Newton Compton, 2007 (1993), 1237-1267.
--- *I giganti della montagna*, in *Quando si è qualcuno, La favola del figlio cambiato, I giganti della montagna*, Milano: Mondadori, 1983.
--- *Interviste a Pirandello*, *"Parole da dire, uomo, agli altri uomini,"* ed. Ivano Pupo. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2002.
--- *La Sagra del Signore della Nave*, in *La Sagra del Signore della Nave, L'Altro Figlio, La Giara. Commedie in un atto*. Firenze: Bemporad & Figlio, 1925.
--- *Lettere a Marta Abba*, ed. Benito Ortolani, Milano: Mondadori, 1995.
--- *Saggi e interventi*, ed. Ferdinando Taviani, Milano: Mondadori, 2006.
--- *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore,* in *Maschere* Nude, ed. Italo Borzi and Maria Argenziano. Roma: Newton Compton, 2007 (1993), 31-68.
--- *Vestire gli ignudi*, in *Maschere Nude*, ed. Italo Borzi and Maria Argenziano. Roma: Newton Compton, 2007 (1993), 413-450.
--- and Gianfrancesco Malipiero. "Il carteggio Pirandello-Malipiero," ed. Giorgio Petrocchi. *Ariel* 1.3 (1986): 136-138.
--- and Stefano Pirandello. *Nel tempo della lontananza* (1919-1936), ed. Sarah Zappulla Muscarà. Caltanisetta-Roma: Salvatore Sciascia editore, 2008.

Praga, *Cronache Teatrali 1919-1928*. 10 Volls. Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1920-1929.

Raffolovich, George. *Benito Mussolini. A Preliminary Sketch.* Firenze: The Owl, 1923.

Rizzo, Giovanni. *D'Annunzio e Mussolini, la verità sui loro rapporti*. Bologna: Cappelli editore, 1960.

Rossi, Cesare. *Mussolini: Com'era.* Rome: Ruffalo, 1947.

Salvemini, Gaetano and George Bernard Shaw. *Polemica sul fascismo.* Roma: Ideazione, 1997.

Sarfatti, Margherita. *Dux.* Milano: Mondadori, 1934.

Savinio, Alberto. *Palchetti romani*, ed. Alessandro Tinterri. Roma: Adelphi, 2009 (1982).
--- *Sorte dell'Europa*. Milano: Bompiani, 1977 (1945).

Settimelli, Emilio. *Mussolini visto da Settimelli.* Roma: Casa Editrice Pinciana, 1933.

Sharma, B.M. *Mussolini*. Lucknow: The Upper India Publishing Company, 1932.

Shaw, George Bernard. *Annajanska, the Bolshevik Empress,* in *The Complete Plays.* London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965, 848-855.
--- *Caesar and Cleopatra*, in *The Complete Plays.* London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965, 250-297.
--- *Everybody's Political What What*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1944.
--- *Geneva*. *Another Political Extravaganza*, in *The Complete Plays.* London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965, 1289-1334.
--- *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism, and Fascism*, ed. Frances Hickson and Dan H. Laurence. New York: Penguin, 1982 (1937).
--- *Man and Superman*, in *The Complete Plays.* London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965, 332-405.
--- *Platform and Pulpit*, ed. Dan H. Laurence. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.
--- *Pygmalion*, in *The Complete Plays.* London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965, 716-757.
--- *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1913.
--- "The Revolutionist's Handbook," in *The Complete Prefaces.* London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965, 167-195.
--- *Saint Joan*, in *The Complete Plays.* London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965, 963-1009.
--- *Sixteen Self Sketches*. London: Constable and Co, 1949.
--- and Gaetano Salvemini. *Bernard Shaw and Fascism.* London: Favil Press, 1927.

SIAE, *Lo spettacolo in Italia, 1936-1941*. 6 Volls. Roma: SIAE, 1937-1942.

Simoni, Renato. *Trent'anni di cronaca drammatica*. 6 volls. Torino: ILTE, 1951-1960.

Tamberlani, Nando. *Teatro e Scenografie.* Roma: Compagnia del Teatro dei giovani, 1930.

Tasca, Angelo. *La nascita del fascismo*, ed and trans. David Biduzza. Torino: Bollati Borringheri, 2006 (1938).

Tilgher, Adriano. *Il problema centrale. Cronache teatrali 1914-1926*. Genova: Edizione del Teatro Stabile, 1973.

Trevisani, Giulio. *Il teatro italiano nell'ordinamento giuridico e economico.* Roma: Ulpiano, 1938.

Valera, Paolo. *Mussolini.* Genova: Il Melangolo, 1995.

Valeri, Nino. *D'Annunzio davanti al fascismo*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 1963.

Vergani, Orio. *Ciano. Una lunga confessione.* Milano: Longanesi, 1974.

Zachariae, Georg. *Mussolini si confessa.* Milano: Rizzoli, 2004.

Zamboni, Armando. *Personalità di Mussolini.* Pisa: Nistri-Lischi Editori, 1941.

Zurlo, Leopoldo. *Memorie Inutili la censura teatrale nel ventennio*. Roma: Ateneo, 1952.

Secondary sources

Adams, Elsie B. *Shaw and the Aesthetes*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1971.

Adamson, Walter J. *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.

Alatri, Paolo. *Gabriele D'Annunzio*. Torino: UTET, 1983.

Alberti, Alberto Cesare. *Poetica Teatrale e Bibliografia di Anton Giulio Bragaglia.* Roma: Bulzoni, 1978.
--- *Il teatro nel fascismo. Pirandello e Bragaglia. Documenti inediti negli archivi italiani*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1974.

Alonge, Roberto. *Pirandello tra realismo e mistificazione*. Napoli: Guida, 1977 [1972].

Andreoli, Annamaria. Introduction to Gabriele d'Annunzio, *Tutte le novelle*. Milano: Mondadori, 1992, i-lxxvii.

Angelini, Franca. "Populismo e cesarismo nel teatro di Giovacchino Forzano." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 65-70.
--- *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Novecento*. Roma: Laterza, 1988.

Antonini, Sandro. *Un palco per l'Ovra. Cultura, spettacolo e polizia politica fascista.* Genova: De Ferrari, 2012.

Artioli, Umberto. *Il combattimento invisibile. D'Annunzio tra romanzo e teatro.* Roma: Laterza, 1995.

Ascheim, Stephen E. "Nietzschean Socialism – Left and right, 1890-1933." *Journal of Contemporary History* 23.2 (1988): 147-68.

Atkinson, Max. *Our Masters' Voices: The Language and Body Language of Politics*. London: Methuen, 1984.

Barbina, Alfredo. "Dietro le quinte del convegno Volta." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 71-79.
--- "Scena e retroscena." *Ariel.* 2-3 (1993): 219-228.

Barbon, Antonio. *Aspetti della privacy di un dittatore. Mussolini e i musicisti del suo tempo.* Milano: Franco Angeli, 2000.

Barish, Jonas. *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*. Los Angeles: University of California, 1981.

Bartolini, Michela. "La messinscena veneziana de *La Nave* del 1938." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 417-423.

Barzini, Luigi Jr. *The Italians*. New York: Antheneum, 1964.

Bentley, Eric. *Bernard Shaw.* New York: Limelight, 1947.

Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945*. Berkeley: University of California, 2001.
--- and Mia Fuller, eds. *Italian Colonialism*. London: Palgrave, 2002.

Berezin, Mabel. "Organization of Political Ideology: Culture, State, and the Theatre in Fascist Italy." *American Sociological Review,* 56.5 (October 1991): 639-651.

Berghaus, Günter. *Fascism and Theatre. Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925-1945*. Oxford: Berghahn, 1996.
--- *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944.* Providence, RI: Berghahn, 1996.
--- *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.

Berman, Russel A. "The Aestheticization of Politics: Walter Benjamin on Fascism and the Avant-Garde." *Stanford Italian Review,* ed. Schnapp and Barbara Spackman. 8.1-2 (1990): 35-52.

Biccari, Gaetano. "La drammaturgia italiana del Novecento sulle scene del Terzo Reich (1932-1944)." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 207-218.

Biguzzi, Stefano. *L'orchestra del Duce*. Torino: UTET, 2003.

Bisicchia, Andrea. *Pirandello in scena. Il linguaggio della rappresentazione*. Torino: UTET, 2007.

Boas, Frederick S. "Joan of Arc in Shakespeare, Schiller, and Shaw." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2.1 (1951): 35-45.

Bonsaver, Guido. *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy.* Toronto: UP, 2007.
--- "Mussolini's Fascism, Literary Censorship, and the Vatican." Primerjalna književnost (Ljubljana), 31 (2008): 201-12.

Bordoni, Carlo. *Cultura e propaganda nell'Italia fascista.* Messina, Firenze: G. D'Anna, 1974.

Italo Borzi, preface to *Vestire gli ignudi*, in Luigi Pirandello, *Maschere nude,* ed. Italo Borzi and Maria Argenziano. Roma: Newton Compton, 2007 (1993), 413.

Bosworth, R.J.B. *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism*. London: Arnold, 1998.
--- *Mussolini's Italy.* New York: Penguin, 2006.

Bowers, Maggie. *Magic(al) Realism.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2005.

Bozzetti, Gherardo. *Mussolini direttore dell'"Avanti."* Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979.

Braun, Emily. *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

Brenner, Hildegard. *La politica culturale del nazismo.* Bari: Laterza, 1965.

Bresciani, Marco. "La repressione degli intellettuali sotto il regime fascista," in *Atlante della letteratura italiana* III, ed. Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà. Torino: Einaudi, 2012, 623-44.

Brogi, Daniela. *Giovani. Vita e scrittura tra fascismo e dopoguerra*. Palermo: Due Punti, 2012.

Brunetta, Gian Piero. *Storia del cinema italiano Volume secondo*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993.

Burdett, Charles. *Vincenzo Cardarelli and his contemporaries. Fascist politics and literary culture.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1999.

Calendoli, Giovanni. *Il teatro delle arti. Le attività teatrali dal 1937 al 1943.* Roma: Enap Psmsad, 1996.

Canali, Mauro. *Le spie del regime.* Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004.

Cannistraro, Philip V. *La fabbrica del consenso: fascismo e mass media*, tr. it. di G. Ferrara. Roma: Laterza, 1975.
--- and Brian R. Sullivan. *Il Duce's Other Woman*. New York: William Morrow and Co, 1993.

Cardillo, Massimo. *Il duce in moviola*. Bari: Edizioni Dedalo, 1983.

Cassata, Francesco. *'La difesa della razza.' Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista.* Torino: Einaudi, 2008.

Cavallo, Pietro. "Appunti per una 'storia teatrale' della società italiana nel ventennio fascista." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 11-54.
--- *Immaginario e rappresentazione: il teatro fascista di propaganda*. Roma: Bonacci, 1990.
--- "Theatre Politics of the Mussolini Regime and Their Influence on Fascist Drama," in *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance,* ed. Günter Berghaus. Oxford: Berghahn, 1996.
--- and P. Iaccio. *Vincere! Vincere! Vincere! Fascismo e società italiana nelle canzoni e nelle riviste di varietà 1935-1943*. Roma: Ianua, 1991.

Cecarini, Laura. "Il teatro straniero in epoca fascista." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 167-184.

Cecchini, Carlo. *Avanguardia Mito e Ideologia: Massimo Bontempelli tra futurismo e fascismo*. Roma: Ventaglio, 1986.

Centanni, Monica, ed. *Artista di Dioniso. Duilio Cambellotti e il teatro greco di Siracusa 1914-1948*. Milano: Electa, 2004.

Chappelow, Allen. *Shaw – The "Chucker-Out*." New York: AMS, 1969.

Chessa, Pasquale. *Dux. Benito Mussolini: Una biografia per immagini.* Milano: Mondadori, 2008.

Cigliana, Simona. "Due epistolari e un carteggio inediti," and "Una lunga 'avventura': Bontempelli a Bordero, a Meletta (Ovvero da *Eva futura* a *Eva ultima*), a Mussolini, 'Duce Velocissimo.'" *L'Illuminista* 5. 13-15 (2005): 21-191.

Clark, Martin. *Mussolini*. Harlow: Pearson, 2005.

Collier, Richard. *Duce! A Biography of Mussolini.* New York: Viking, 1971.

Costa, Simona. *D'Annunzio*. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2012.
--- *Luigi Pirandello*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1978.

D'Amico, Alessandro and Alessandro Tinterri. *Pirandello capocomico*. Palermo: Sellerio, 1987.

D'Incà, Renzia. "Sem Benelli: Un'inquieta passione civile." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 81-95.

Davis, Tracy C. *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre.* Westport, Conn: Praegar, 1994.

De Castris, Arcangelo Leone. "Pirandello e il fascismo," in *Pirandello e la politica*. *Atti del Convegno di Agrigento,* ed. Enzo Lauretta. Milano: Mursia, 1991-1992.

De Felice, Renzo. *Autobiografia del fascismo. Antologia di testi fascisti 1919-1945.* Torino: Einaudi, 2001.
--- Introduction to *Carteggio D'Annunzio Mussolini 1919/1938*, ed. Renzo De Felice and Emilio Mariano. Milano: Mondadori, 1971, vii-lxiv.
--- *Le interpretazioni del fascismo.* Roma: Laterza, 1969.
--- I. *Mussolini il rivoluzionario 1883-1920.* Torino: Einaudi, 1965.
--- II. *Mussolini il fascista. La conquista del potere 1921-1925.* Torino: Einaudi, 1966.
--- III. *Mussolini il fascista. L'organizzazione dello Stato fascista 1925-1929.* Torino: Einaudi, 1968.
--- IV. *Mussolini il duce I. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936.* Torino: Einaudi, 1974.
--- V. *Mussolini il duce. II. Lo Stato totalitario 1936-1940.* Torino: Einaudi, 1965.
--- VI. *Mussolini l'alleato I. L'Italia in guerra 1940-1943. 1 Dalla guerra 'breve' alla guerra lunga.* Torino: Einaudi, 1990.
--- VII. *Mussolini l'alleato I. L'Italia in guerra 1940-1943. 2. Crisi e agonia del regime.*. Torino: Einaudi, 1990.
--- VIII. *Mussolini l'alleato II. La guerra civile 1943-1945.* Torino: Einaudi, 1997.

De Grazia, Victoria. *The Culture of Consent. Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.
--- *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945.* Berkeley: University of California, 1993.
--- and Sergio Luzzatto. *Dizionario del fascismo.* 2 Volls. Torino: Einaudi, 2002.

De Rosa, Stefano. *Giovacchino Forzano.* Firenze: Castelvecchio, 2008.

Di Stefano, Carlo. *La censura teatrale in Italia (1600 - 1962).* Bologna: Cappelli editore, 1964.

Diggins, John P. *Mussolini and Fascism. The View from America.* Princeton: UP, 1972.

Dogliani, Patrizia. *Il fascismo degli italiani.* Torino: UTET, 2008.

Doglio, Federico. *Il teatro pubblico in Italia*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1976.

Donati, Corrado. "Massimo Bontempelli e '900': un numero inedito tra due profezie," in *Massimo Bontempelli scrittore e intellettuale*, ed. Corrado Donati. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1992. 187-204.

Doroni, Stefano. "Aldo De Benedetti: l'elogio del *focolare* nello spettacolo del Ventennio." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 97-119.

Duranti, Simone. *Lo spirito gregario. I gruppi universitari fascista tra politica e propaganda (1930-1940)*. Roma: Donzelli, 2008.

Ebner, Michael. *Ordinary Violence in Fascist Italy.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.

Falasca-Zamponi, Simonetta. *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*. Berkeley: University of California, 1997.

Fanelli, Carlo. *Teatro e fascismo a Cosenza.* Caraffa di Catanzaro: Abramo, 2006.

Fano, Nicola. *Tessere o non tessere. I comici e la censura fascisti*. Firenze: Liberal libri, 1999.
--- *Vieni avanti, cretino. Storie e testi del avanspettacolo e del varietà*. Roma, Napoli: Theoria, 1993.

Fermi, Laura. *Mussolini.* Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961.

Ferrara, Patrizia, ed. *Censura teatrale e fascismo (1931-1944). La storia, l'archivio, l'inventario.* Roma: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, 2004.

Festorazzi, Roberto. *D'Annunzio e la Piovra fascista. Spionaggio al Vittoriale nella testimonianza del federale di Brescia*. Roma: Il Minotauro, 2005.

Fielden, John. "Shaw's *Saint Joan* as Tragedy." *Twentieth Century Literature* 3.2. (1957): 59-67.

Fontanelli, Giorgio. "Fascismo e teatro." *Dimensioni* 3.6 (1978).
--- "Mussolini Drammaturgo." *Dimensioni* 3.7 (1978): 43-56.

Forgacs, David. *L'industrializzazione della cultura italiana. 1880-1990.* Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992.

Fuller, Mia. *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Gaborik, Patricia. "Il censore censurato," in *Atlante della letteratura italiana* III, ed. Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà. Torino: Einaudi, 2012, 786-92.

--- "La Donna Mobile: Massimo Bontempelli's *Nostra Dea* as Fascist Modernism." *Modern Drama* 50.2 (2007): 210-32.
--- "Lo spettacolo del fascismo," in *Atlante della letteratura italiana* III, ed. Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà. Torino: Einaudi, 2012, 589-613.

Galateria, Marinella Mascia. *Racconti allo specchio. Studi bontempelliani.* Roma: Bulzoni, 2005.

Gatch, Katherine Haynes. "The Real Sorrow of Great Men; Mr. Bernard Shaw's Sense of Tragedy." *College English* 8.5 (1947): 233-34.

Gentile, Emilio. "The Conquest of Modernity: From Modernist Nationalism to Fascism," trans. Lawrence Rainey. *Modernism/Modernity* 1.3 (1994): 55-87.
--- *E fu subito regime.* Roma: Laterza, 2012.
--- *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione.* Roma: Laterza, 2002.
-- *Fascismo di pietra.* Roma: Laterza, 2007.
--- *Il culto del littorio.* Roma: Laterza, 1993.
(*The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996.)
--- *"La nostra sfida alle stelle." Futuristi in politica*. Roma: Laterza, 2009.
--- *La grande Italia.* Roma: Laterza, 2006.
--- *La via italiana al totalitarismo. Il partito e lo Stato nel regime fascista.* Roma: Carocci, 1995.
--- *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista. 1918-1925.* Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996 (1975).
--- ed. *Modernità totalitaria. Il fascismo italiano.* Roma: Laterza, 2008.
---- "The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy," in *Fascism and Theatre*, ed. Günter Berghaus. Oxford: Berghahn, 1996, 72-93.

Gentili, Sonia. "Il male della banalità. Nuovi documenti su Vitaliano Brancati e la censura." *Bollettino di Italianistica*, 4.2 (2007): 193-224.

Gherbi, Marco. *Analisi della comunicazione non verbale nei discorsi di Mussolini*. Tesi di Laurea specialistica alla Università degli studi di Trieste, 2006.

Ghirardo, Diane. "City and Theater: The Rhetoric of Fascist Architecture." *Stanford Italian Review* 8. 1-2 (1990): 165-193.

Gibbs, A.M., ed. *Shaw: Interviews and Recollections*. Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1990.

Giudice, Gaspare. *Pirandello.* Torino: UTET, 1963.
(*Pirandello. A Biography*, trans. Alastair Hamilton, Oxford UP, London 1975.)

Granatella, Laura, ed. *"Arrestate L'Autore": D'Annunzio in Scena*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1993.

Gregor, A James. *Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism.* Berkeley: University of California, 1979.

Griffin, Roger. *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

--- "Staging the Nation's Rebirth, " in *Fascism and Theatre*, ed. Günter Berghaus. Oxford: Berghahn, 1996, 11-29.

Griffith, Gareth. *Socialism and Superior Brains. The political thoughts of Bernard Shaw.* London: Routledge, 1993.

Griffiths, Clive E.J. . "Theatrical censorship in Italy during the Fascist Period," in *Culture, Censorship, and the State*, ed. Guido Bonsaver and Robert S. Gordon. London: Legenda, 2005, 76-85.

--- *The Theatrical Works of Giovacchino Forzano: Drama for Mussolini's Italy*. New York: Edwin Mellen, 2000.

Guenther, Irene. "Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community*, ed. Lois P. Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Charlotte, NC: Duke UP, 1995, 15-32.

Guglielminetti, Marziano. *Pirandello*. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2006.

Guspini, Ugo. *L'Orrechio del regime. Le intercettazioni telefoniche al tempo del fascismo*. Milano: Mursia, 1973.

Hart, Gail. "Schiller the Killer: Wilhelm Tell and the Decriminalization of Murder." *Goethe Yearbook* 12 (2004): 197-207.

Hewitt, Andrew. *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*. Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1993.

Holroyd, Michael. *Bernard Shaw. The Lure of Fantasy, 1918-1951*. New York: Random House, 1991.

Iaccio, Pasquale. "La censura teatrale durante il fascismo." *Storia contemporanea* 17.4 (1986): 567-614.

--- *La scena negata. Il teatro vietato durante la guerra fascista (1940-1943)*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1994.

Isnenghi, Mario. *L'Italia del fascio*. Firenze: Giunti, 1996.

Jameson, Frederic. *Wyndham Lewis: The Modernist as Fascist.* London: Verso, 2008 (1979).

Jewell, Keala. "Magic Realism and Real Politics: Massimo Bontempelli's Literary Compromise." *Modernism/Modernity* 15.4 (2008): 725-44.

Karan, Kashi Kumar. *Bernard Shaw and the Concept of the Superman*. New Dehli: Vanni Prakashan, 1989.

Labanca, Nicola. *Una guerra per l'impero. Memorie della campagna d'Etiopia 1935-36.* Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005.

Lattarulo, Leonardo. "Pirandello tra Croce e Gentile." *Ariel* I.3 (1986): 59-68.

Lepre, Aurelio. *Mussolini*, Roma: Laterza, 1998.
--- ed. *La guerra immaginata. Teatro, canzone e fotografia 1940-1943*. Napoli: Liguori, 1989.

Longman, Stanley. "Mussolini and the Theatre." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 60.2 (1974): 212-224.

Lorch, Jennifer. *Pirandello. Six Characters in Search of an Author (Plays in Production)*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.
--- and Susan Bassnet. *Luigi Pirandello in the Theatre*. *A Documentary Record*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Lucignani, Luciano. "Una commedia all'italiana, protagonisti D'Annunzio, Pirandello, e Mussolini." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 147-156.

Lupo, Salvatore. *Il fascismo: la politica in un regime totalitario*. Roma: Donzelli, 2000.

Luzzatto, Sergio. *Il corpo del duce.* Torino: Einaudi, 1998.
(*The Body of the Duce.* New York: Metropolitan, 2005.)
--- *L'immagine del duce. Mussolini nella fotografia dell'Istituto Luce*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2001.

Macchia, Giovanni. *Pirandello o la stanza della tortura*. Milano: Mondadori, 1994.

Mack Smith, Denis. *Mussolini: A Biography*. New York: Vintage, 1982.

Manacorda, Giuliano. "Nino Frank e '900,'" in *Massimo Bontempelli scrittore e intellettuale*, ed. Corrado Donati. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1992, 205-219.

Mangoni, Luisa. *L'interventismo della cultura. Intellettuali e riviste del fascismo.* Roma: Laterza, 1974.

Meldolesi, Claudio. *Fondamenti del teatro italiano. La generazione dei registi*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1984.

Mercaldo, M. Carmina. "La tentazione del teatro: Bottai; Farinacci; Mussolini." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 157-66.

Miller, Arthur. *On Politics and the Art of Acting*. New York: Viking, 2001.

Millet, Gabriele Cacho. *Pirandello in Argentina*. Palermo: Novecento, 1987.

Milza, Pierre. *Gli ultimi giorni di Mussolini*, transl. Marcella Uberti-Bona. Milano: Longanesi, 2011.
--- *Mussolini*, trans. Gian Carlo Brioschi, Filippo Scarpelli. Roma: Carocci, 2000.
--- and Serge Berstein. *Storia del fascismo. Da piazza San Seplcro a piazzale Loreto*, trans. Maria Grazia Meriggi. Milano: Rizzoli, 1995.

Molinari, Cesare. *L'attrice divina. Eleonora Duse nel teatro italiano fra i due secoli.* Roma: Bulzoni, 1985.

Mondello, Elisabetta. *Roma Futurista. I periodici e i luoghi dell'avanguardia nella Roma degli anni venti.* Milano: Franco Angeli, 1990.

Morteo, G.R. *Idea della regia teatrale in Italia dal 1920 al 1940*. Torino: Giappichelli, 1974.

Mosse, George L. "Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations." *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996): 245-52.
--- *Masses and Man.* Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1987.
--- *The Image of Man.* Oxford: UP, 1996.

Muscarà, Sarah Zappulla. "Luigi Pirandello: Il Premio Nobel o della solitudine," Catania: La Catinella, 2002.

Musiedlak, Didier. *Il mito di Mussolini.* Firenze: Le Lettere, 2009.

Nelis, Jan. "Cesare in scena. Achter de schermen van theater ten tijde van het italiaanse fascisme." DOCUMENTA 24.1 (2006): 3-22.

Neville, Peter. *Mussolini.* London: Routledge, 2004.

Nicoloso, Paolo. *Mussolini architetto: propaganda e paesaggio urbano nell'Italia fascista*. Torino: Einaudi, 2008.

Ottai, Antonella. *Come a concerto. Il teatro umoristico nelle scene degli anni trenta.* Roma: Bulzoni, 2002.
--- *Eastern. La commedia ungherese sulle scene italiane fra le due guerre,* Roma: Bulzoni, 2010.

Pardini, Giuseppe. "La schiavitù delle beffe": Sem Benelli e il regime fascista," *Nuova storia Contemporanea* 5 (2002): 131-52.

Passerini, Luisa. *Mussolini immaginario*. Roma: Laterza, 1991.

Payne, Stanley. *A History of Fascism 1914-1945.* Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1995.

Pedullà, Gabriele. "Giovanni della Casa e il bon ton dell'umanista," in *Atlante della letteratura italiana* II, ed. Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà. Torino: Einaudi, 2011, 137-143.
--- *Parole al potere. Discorsi politici italiani*. Milano: BUR, 2011.

Pedullà, Gianfranco. *Il teatro italiano nel tempo del fascismo.* Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994.

Perrone, Domenico. *Vitaliano Brancati*. *Le avventure morali e i "piaceri" della scrittura*. Bompiani: Milano, 1997.

Petacco, Arrigo. *L'archivio segreto di Mussolini.* Milano: Mondadori, 1997.

Pietrini, Sandra. *L'arte dell'attore dal Romanticismo a Brecht*. Roma: Laterza, 2009.

Pisanty, Valentina. *La difesa della razza. Antologia 1938-1943.* Milano: Bompiani, 2006.

Piscopo, Ugo. *Massimo Bontempelli. Per una modernità tra le pareti lisce*. Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche italiane, 2001.

Pivato, Stefano. *Il teatro del parrocchia. Mondo cattolico e organizzazione del consenso durante il fascismo*. Roma: Elengraf, 1979.

Pollard, John. *The Fascist Experience in Italy*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Poesio, Paolo Emilio. "Le memorie non inutili del censore." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 55-64.

Pontiggia, Elena. "Bontempelli e gli artisti," in *Massimo Bontempelli. Realismo Magico e altri scritti sull'arte*, ed. Elena Pontiggia. Milano: Abscodita, 2006, 123-57.

Possenti, Francesco. *I teatri del primo novecento*. Roma: Lucarini, 1987.

Providenti, Elio. *Pirandello impolitico. Tra radicalismo e fascismo*. Roma: Salerno, 2000.

Puppa, Paolo. "Pubblico e popolo nel teatro fascista." *Rivista di drammaturgia* 18 (1980).

Quadri, Franco. *Il teatro del regime.* Milano: Mazzotta, 1976.

Quaglietti, Lorenzo. "Il cinema degli anni trenta in Italia: primi elementi per una analisi politico-strutturali," in *Materiali sul cinema italiano 1929/1943*. Pesaro: Undicesima Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, 1975, 283-330.

Quargnolo, Mario. *Dal tramonto dell'operetta al tramonto della rivista*. Milano: Pan, 1980.

Quazzolo, Paolo. "Una realtà di frontiera: Trieste, il teatro fascista e il Carro di Tespi." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 185-194.

Raffaelli, Sergio. "Mussolini contro il dialetto romagnolo." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 139-145.

Riall, Lucy. *Garibaldi. Invention of a Hero*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Roach, Joseph R. *The Player's Passion. Studies in the Science of Acting*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993.

Salierno, Vito. *La censura occulta e palese nei confronti di D'Annunzio. Giovanni Rizzo, l'‹‹occhiuto carceriere›› al Vittoriale e i suoi rapporti segreti a Mussolini*. Lanciano: Rocco Carabba, 2011.

Santomassimo, Gianpasquale. *La terza via fascista. Il mito del corporativismo*. Roma: Carocci, 2006.

Scarpellini, Emanuela. *Organizzazione teatrale e politica del teatro nell'Italia fascista*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1989.

Schino, Mirella. *La nascita della regia teatrale*. Roma: Laterza, 2003.

--- “Storia di una parola. Fascismo e mutamenti di mentalità teatrale.” *Teatro e Storia* 25.32 (2011): 169-212.

Schnapp, Jeffrey T., ed. *A Primer of Italian Fascism.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2000.
--- “Epic Demonstrations: Fascist Modernity and the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution,” in *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture*, ed., R. Golsan. Hanover: UP of New England, 1992. 1-32.
--- *Staging Fascism:18BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses.* Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1996.

Sciarretta, Roberta. *Le parole della bonifica*. Latina: Novecento, 2007.

Scimé, Giuliana, ed. *Il laboratorio dei Bragaglia. 1911/*32. Ravenna: Agenzia Editoriale coop. r.l., 1986.

Scott, Charles. “Genus, Superman; Species, Multiform.” *Educational Theatre Journal* 12.4 (Dec 1960): 283-94.

Sedita, Giovanni. *Gli intellettuali di Mussolini. La cultura finanziata dal fascismo*. Firenze: Le Lettere, 2010.

Smith, Warren Sylvester. *Bishop of Everywhere: Bernard Shaw and the Life Force*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1982.

Somigli, Luca and Mario Moroni, ed. *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde.* Toronto: UP, 2004.

Spackman, Barbara. *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997.

Spera, Francesco. *Vitaliano Brancati*. Milano: Mursia, 1981.

Stacchini, Vanna Gazzola. *Il teatro di Vitaliano Brancati. Poetica mito e pubblico (con inediti*), Lecce: Edizione Milella, 1972.

Sternhell, Zeev with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri. *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994.

Stone, Marla. *The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998.

Symington, Rodney. *The Nazi Appropriation of Shakespeare. Cultural Politics in the Third Reich.* Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2005.

Tarquini, Alessandra. *Storia della cultura fascista,* Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011.

Thompson, Doug, *State Control in Fascist Italy*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991.
--- “The Organisation, Fascistisation and Management of Theatre in Italy, 1925-1943.” *Fascism and Theatre*, ed. Günter Berghaus. Oxford: Berghahn, 1996, 94-112.

Tinterri, Alessandro. "Bontempelli critico teatrale nell'Italia del primo dopoguerra," in *Massimo Bontempelli scrittore e intellettuale*, ed. Corrado Donati. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1992, 259-268.
--- "*The Gods of the Mountain* at the Teatro Odescalchi." New Theatre Quarterly 3.12 (1987): 352-357.
--- *Il teatro italiano dal naturalismo a Pirandello*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990.
--- "‹‹L'Alba Apparì›› (Firenze 1933)." *Teatro e Storia* 22.29 (2008): 361-382.
--- "*La Nave* di Guido Salvini: Finzione e realtà nella storia di uno spettacolo." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 409-415.
--- *Savinio e lo spettacolo*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993.

Tiozzi, Enrico. "L'Italia dei premi Nobel," in *Atlante della letteratura italiana* III, ed. Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà, Torino: Einaudi, 2012, 546-50.

Valentini, Valentina. *Il poema visibile. Le prime messe in scene delle tragedie di Gabriele d'Annunzio.* Roma: Bulzoni, 1993.

Verdone, Mario. *Anton Giulio Bragalia*. Roma: Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, 1965.
--- "Mussolini's Theatre of the Masses." *Fascism and Theatre,* ed. Günter Berghaus. Oxford: Berghahn, 1996, 133-9.

Vicentini, Claudio. *Pirandello. Il disagio del teatro*. Venezia: Marsilio, 1993.
--- *La teoria della recitazione, dall'antichità al Settecento*. Venezia: Marsilio, 2012.

Vigna, Francesca. *Il 'corago sublime': Anton Giulio Bragaglia e il Teatro delle Arti*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2008.

Weintraub, Stanley. *The Unexpected Shaw. Biographical Approaches to G.B.S. and His Work*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982.

Witt, Mary Ann Frese. "Fascist Discourse and Pirandellian Theatre." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 912 (1992): 303-31.
--- *The Search for Modern Tragedy. Aesthetic Fascism in Italy and France.* Cornell: Cornell UP, 2001.

Zagarrio, Vito. "Schizofrenie del modello fascista," in *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 5. Venezia: Marsilio, 2006. 37-60.

Zanotti, Paolo. *Il gay. Dove si racconta come è stata inventata l'identità omosessuale*. Roma: Fazi, 2005.

Zoppello, Mariateresa. "Teatro veneto e censura fascista." *Ariel* 2-3 (1993): 195-206.

Zunino, Pier Giorgio. *L'ideologia del fascismo. Miti, credenze, e valori nella stabilizzazione del regime.* Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985